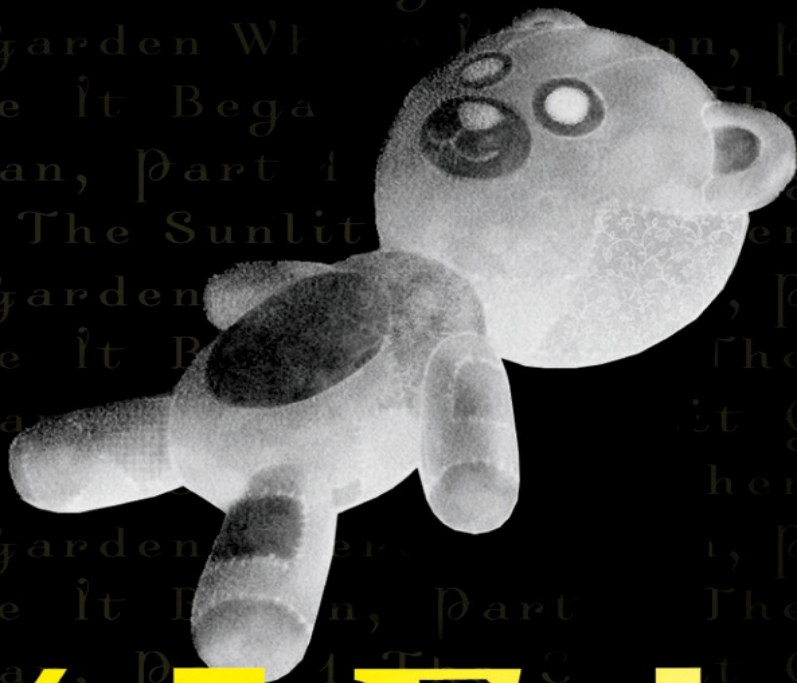


Volume: 5



KIELI

The Sunlit Garden Where It Began, Part 1

The Sunlit Garden Where It Began, Part 1

Yukako Kabei

KIELI

WAIT
THERE
JUST
A
SECOND!

WAIT
THERE!

BEEN A
LONG TIME
SINCE I
LAST SAW
WESTERBURY...





CHAPTER 1: THE DREAM THAT DISSOLVED INTO NOISE



*Ninety years without slumbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock
His life's seconds numbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock*

The girl's singing was clumsy, but she sang with perfect seriousness, as if she was savoring each note. His low voice joined her after a fraction of a beat. Whenever she lost the thread, he gently gave her a hint, watching over her, ready to catch her if she stumbled.

A young woman with long black hair and bangs is shown from the chest up, looking upwards with a curious expression. She is wearing a dark green duffle coat with large brass buttons over a dark blue and white striped shirt. In the background, a grey, corrugated metal roof slopes upwards. A small white cat with dark spots is perched on the edge of the roof, looking down at the woman. The sky is a deep, dark blue.

“You can get down now.”

A small shadow moved on the roof. A hazy, dark clump of something like noise gingerly rested one front paw on the board. The paw was pulled back with a start, but then the creature darted smoothly down the plank to spring into a run the instant it touched the ground.

Right before it disappeared into the dim night, the noise resolved itself into the shape of a cat for the barest instant and gave a single *meow*.

CHAPTER 2: WATCHING YOU FROM WITHIN THE WALLS

When he pulled out a cigarette and lit it, the awkward atmosphere eased a bit. He tilted his head back as he exhaled so his eye could follow the trail of smoke into the night sky and wondered with a certain puzzled admiration why the habit of smoking was so convenient for liars. It struck him that whoever had invented the very first cigarette long ago must have been a con man.



CHAPTER 3: REAL UNDYING

CHAPTER 4: THE SUNLIT GARDEN WHERE IT BEGAN, THE NIGHTTIME LABYRINTH WITH NO END



The sky was still the same old cloudy sand color. If “God” or whoever was really watching from the other side of it, he was sure the layer of dust pollution kept Him from ever having an unbroken view of the world below.

In a distant corner of their sky, the long, low *boom* of a cannon sounded. That was the same as always, too — a boringly familiar sound. It was all just a part of his daily life.

BENEATH THE SAME OLD CHIN-UP BARS

CHAPTER 1:
THE DREAM THAT DISSOLVED INTO NOISE

CHAPTER 2:
WATCHING YOU FROM WITHIN THE WALLS

CHAPTER 3:
REAL UNDYING

INTERLUDE:
IN A WINDY CLOISTER ONE DAY

CHAPTER 4:
THE SUNLIT GARDEN WHERE IT BEGAN,
THE NIGHTTIME LABYRINTH WITH NO END

EPISODE 1: JOACHIM

EPISODE 2: NEVERLAND-I



KIELI

The Sunlit Garden Where It Began (part 1)



NEW YORK

Copyright

Kieli: The Sunlit Garden Where It Began (Part 1)
YUKAKO KABEI

Translation by Sarah Alys Lindholm

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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BENEATH THE SAME OLD CHIN-UP BARS

Seized by a sudden sense of *déjà vu*, the boy looked up.

His eyes traveled to the wall clock above the chalkboard without any real thought. It was an analog style of clock, a round face with its circle of unfriendly black numbers, framed by a black rim. It was just about as far from showing “personality” or “decorative flair” as one could get and still be in the same universe. 52, 53, 54...The slightly warped second hand crawled oh-so-slowly around the yellowing clock face, marking time sluggishly. 57, 58, 59—

The minute hand clicked forward. According to a system of time from a faraway planet that had been in use since the colonization era, it was 2:57.

...*What was that?* He felt as if he’d lived that exact same moment before, but when he really thought about it, 2:57 happened twice a day whether anyone liked it or not, so that wasn’t really so weird.

He only tilted his head in confusion for a moment before looking back down and striking his near-empty lighter a few times to get his cigarette going. Sitting on the teacher’s desk and swinging his short legs back and forth, he gazed at the white chalk scribbles that filled the board in front of him.

“Today Sarah and Nahar are on duty!” “← That’s wrong! Seth changed it!” “Elisha had another ‘accident’ today!” “No I didn’t!” “Joachim and Sarah were kissing under the stairwell!” And there was more: drawings, like the one of the twisting railroad line that ran from one end of the board to the other, and the ones of what he could only assume were girls, even though he got the feeling the human body didn’t actually work that way, and that tiny little note in the corner—

“Please let the war end soon so we can go home.”

He didn’t know to whom that faint, unpracticed handwriting belonged or when it had been written there. But for some reason, no matter how many times new doodles got drawn over the old ones, that one note was always spared.

When he stretched out his right hand and rubbed at the board with his palm, he smeared part of the railway sideways. Chalk dust stuck to his fingers. He thought he’d scribbled something here, too, but he’d forgotten which one was his. It must have been one of these. Any of them but the *“Please let the war end soon”* one.

In the afternoon the classroom was deserted and quiet. Outside the

wide-open window stretched the same unchanging sky they saw every day, faintly blurred by clouds of sand. The chilly late-autumn air lightly stirred the column of smoke rising from the tip of his cigarette. It carried with it the innocent whooping of the young boys playing in the schoolyard below. Mixed in with their cries, he could pick out snatches of timid singing.

Not only was the voice too soft to really hear, it was also horribly off-pitch—but it was a melody he knew well, so he had no trouble recognizing it. It was some stupid old song everybody learned in first or second grade, no matter what school they went to. Something about an old man and a big grandfather clock and ninety years doing something-or-other.

Tick, tock, tick, tock...

It was a lispy girl's voice. *Must be Elisha*. He could picture the youngest girl in his class squatting beneath the chin-up bars, drawing a picture in the sand there and crooning her favorite phrases from the song in clumsy but clear tones.

"Erase that," ordered a grumpy voice from somewhere outside of his line of sight. He turned away from the schoolyard window to find a boy his own age standing outside the window that opened into the hallway. This boy with colorless hair and eyes the same blue-gray as the sky was the only friend his own age left in the whole school. Although that sure didn't mean they actually got along...

He followed the direction of that slate-gray gaze to the chalkboard. The "*Joachim and Sarah were kissing under the stairwell!*" caught his eye. He tilted his head, considering this for a moment. "So you really were, then."

"No, we weren't."

"Right," he retorted, grinning. A pebble flew at him from the hallway, grazing his cheek.

"No, we weren't!"

"Okay, okay. You're so violent." Whether it was true or not, somebody had probably written it there to hassle them. Seth or one of his buddies, most likely.

A faint smile still lurked at the corner of his lips around his cigarette as he looked around for the eraser. Not finding it, he just rubbed out the names with his hand. It didn't seem worth the effort to wipe off the whole thing.

His friend stood in the hallway watching him, elbows propped on the

window ledge. (*Don't just stand there, come in here and erase the damn thing yourself!* he thought.) Then he said in an offhand way, "Oh, hey, I heard a bunch of tanks came up and parked by the western wall this morning."

"Huh. Why?"

"Dunno."

"And?"

"Eh, that's all." And that was the end of that. Just a meaningless little exchange.

He didn't care about the tanks, but there must be a lot of soldiers there, and that meant maybe he could get some smokes. As he let that childlike humming about the old clock wash over him, he thought that maybe if he was lucky he could get some gum and little chocolates, too. Stuff like that would make good presents for Elisha and the other kids.

Maybe we should go visit the soldiers tomorrow. If the weather's nice.

"See you tomorrow, then," the other boy told him casually, even though he hadn't said a word of that out loud. When he blinked and turned around, his friend had already pushed himself lightly off the sill and stepped away.

"Joachim —"

"What?"

"Nothing." He hadn't particularly thought of anything to say before he'd called out to stop the other boy, so he just echoed, "See you tomorrow."

"Sure." Joachim nodded, turning away. He silently watched his friend leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the wall clock strike 3:00 on the dot. The long column of ash at the end of his cigarette fell and fluttered into his lap. The moment he looked down with a grunt of annoyance at himself, another flash of that weird *déjà vu* hit him.

He heard someone scream out in the schoolyard.

In the instant it took him to reflexively jerk his head up and slide off the desk, every windowpane in the building that faced the schoolyard swelled up in a distended bowl shape. A split second later, they all soundlessly shattered to pieces—well, maybe they'd made a sound, but the shock wave had ruptured his eardrums, and for a while the world was closed off in silence. A white mist filled the classroom, blanketing his vision and making him blind as well as deaf. He wasn't sure if the mist was gun smoke or tiny shards of glass. The next thing he knew, the force

of the blast had picked him up, and the side of his head was slamming into the chalkboard.

Body scraping down the board, he slowly sank to his knees on the podium. His eyes wandered vaguely around the room, almost without conscious thought. When they lit on the chalkboard, he saw a splattering of red over the drawing of the railroad, as if someone had thrown a paintbrush at it. He put a hand to his own temple. When he pulled it away, there on his chalk-stained palm was a thick smear of the same garish red. After a beat, he realized it was his own blood.

Now that his hearing was finally starting to return, he was assaulted by an awful, echoing wail like someone ringing a bell nonstop. The noise pounding at his brain made his head reel even more than the pain at his temple did. In some dim corner of his nonfunctioning mind, he just barely made out the first sound that seemed to have any meaning; it was his friend's voice shrieking about something.

“—raim! Ephraim!”

Huh. That was his name the voice was calling. Joachim had been taking cover in the hallway; now the other boy was rushing to his side almost before he'd stood up. Ephraim didn't see any reason for Joachim to look *that* desperate as he called his name—but what worried him a hell of a lot more was why he couldn't hear Elisha singing anymore. He knew it would actually be weirder for someone to *keep* singing under the circumstances, but he couldn't help his strange, stubborn belief that Elisha would.

Elisha's time had stopped at 3:00, just like the clock on the wall, so she would never sing again.

CHAPTER 1

THE DREAM THAT DISSOLVED INTO NOISE

This planet had teddy bears, but none of the animals called “bears.” Maybe they’d never been brought here on the colonization ship, or maybe they’d gone extinct because they couldn’t adapt to this planet’s environment. But at any rate, the people here had never seen bears except in old drawings or as stuffed toys.

So it was practically a miracle that Harvey was able to recognize *that* thing as a bear.

Its head was unnaturally large in proportion to its body, yet the round ears and plastic eyes were actually too small. It was made out of pink and brown patchwork cloth, and it was a head taller than Harvey—

—And it was standing right next to him, leaning against the train station wall. A cigarette poked out of its gaping mouth, which was carved in a permanent smile; and it was holding itself stiffly, looking absolutely despondent, when suddenly that round head swiveled unexpectedly toward him.

“Could I trouble you for a light?” a man’s voice asked politely.

Harvey fished out the lighter he’d been fiddling with inside his pocket to kill time and tossed it lightly toward the bear. Some instinct kept him silent.

“Thanks,” said the bear, deftly catching it in a sort of rough, careless pose of its hands (when Harvey looked closer, he realized the trick—there were finger holes in an obscure spot on the underside of each paw). The bear brought the lighter to the tip of its cigarette and was just about to click it when all its movements came to a dead stop again. Just as Harvey was wondering what the problem was *this* time, it yanked at its jaw with one hand to pry its head loose a little, resettling the cigarette into the human mouth now peeking out from under the costume, and lit it for real.

The man inside the bear (whose head was now smiling in a bizarre direction relative to its body) inhaled once and blew out a stream of smoke with a look of true satisfaction. Then he tossed the lighter back. “Just taking a break. This thing is heavy.”

Harvey didn’t know how to react to that, so after a pause, he just made an apathetic “Huh” of acknowledgment and looked away, drawing out a new cigarette of his own with the corner of his mouth. All his movements up until the cigarette was actually lit were carried out with his left hand alone. It was a bit of a handicap, but then, he was used to it.

Through their cloud of smoke, he let his gaze roam the rotary in front

of the station. Just as he was wondering to himself what a tall man and a giant bear suit rather placidly smoking side by side must have looked like to the rest of the world, he caught sight of a mottled pattern of pea-green and brown hopping up and down on the other side of the road. It was another animal costume made out of the same patchwork cloth as the bear, just in different colors. Harvey guessed it was supposed to be a mouse. A mouse that at the moment was waving both arms emphatically.

“Uh-oh, he’s pissed,” said the bear next to him, tossing his cigarette butt to the ground and pushing up off the wall. He ran off toward the mouse, adjusting his skewed headpiece as he went. That mottled pink pattern covered in striped overalls was garish enough to make Harvey’s eye sting, yet his floofy paws made his footfalls sound oddly relaxed.

Harvey let out a smoky sigh. “What was with him?”

“Yeah, I hate people who litter.”

“...That’s what you’re focusing on?” He felt as though there were a lot more fundamental issues with the whole situation, but whatever.

“This is what’s wrong with kids these days, this whole postwar generation,” grouched a man’s voice, and the small radio on the floor by Harvey’s bag spat out a burst of dark noise particles in chorus. *“Herbie —”*

“That’s ‘Harvey,’” he corrected automatically. He could guess what was coming next, so he shifted a little to stamp out the tip of the cigarette butt with his foot before the Corporal could start harping on him to do it. “She’s sure taking her time in the bathroom,” he grumbled to no one in particular. With his back still against the wall, he sank into a crouch. When he absently looked up at the sky, he hit the back of his head against the bricks.

The sky above him was a hazy yellowish-gray from the fossil fuel smoke spewing from the exhaust pipes of the city’s tightly crowded jungle of buildings. When they’d arrived at the station just ten minutes ago and gotten off the train, the first thing to hit him had been the feel and smell of the smog. The city had one foot in the door of winter, but the smoke retained a faint warmth.

They were in Westerbury parish’s central city, the grand metropolis of commerce and tourism.

This was the only city in the whole wide world with three separate railroad stations to its name: East, West, and Central. East Station, where they were, was on the outskirts of town and was supposed to be at least

somewhat smaller than the other two, but it was still alive with the hustle and bustle of a city, packed with people and cars and buildings.

Three-wheeled taxis with tubular fuel tanks on top lined the rotary. All the cab drivers were vying for customers, smiling phony smiles. Squat, box-shaped buses chugged slowly back and forth along the street beyond them, spitting exhaust. On the 3-D screens set into the walls of the buildings facing the station, the same video had been playing over and over for so long that Harvey half-thought he was being brainwashed. It showed a marching band of cartoonish mechanical dolls parading through a mechanical city toward a giant clock tower. At the end of the film a caption read, "South Westerbury Park: 'The Whimsical City' begins its long-awaited week of Colonization Days celebration tomorrow!"

Right underneath the screen stood the guys in the bear and mouse suits, improvising a little pantomime performance while they handed out balloons. A belated realization hit Harvey, and he blurted out an idiotic little "Ah!" before he could stop himself. "So Colonization Days start tomorrow?"

"You've been staring at that video for over ten minutes, and you're just now figuring that out?"

"Eh," said Harvey. He'd *seen* the words over and over until he was sick of them, but they hadn't actually connected with anything in his brain. The Colonization Days didn't really affect him one way or the other, so they'd slipped his mind somewhere along the line...but now that he thought about it, the city did have sort of a festival atmosphere to it. Though on the other hand, maybe Westerbury was always like this. "I picked a weird time to come here, then..."

Westerbury was noisy enough on its own; the thought of it getting even more crowded with tourists pouring in for the ten-day holiday seriously put him off. It was a lucky break for him in the sense that it'd be easier to go unnoticed, but searching for someone in all this chaos was just insane.

He saw a black truck pulling up to the station just in time to take the place of a three-wheeled taxi setting off with some rich passengers. Reflex made him lift a little out of his crouch on the asphalt, on the alert—the truck was miniaturized for city patrol, but it was definitely one of the Church Soldiers' trucks. The Church Security Forces had a large base here in central city, so the Church Soldiers even had the city's own security operations under their thumbs.

As Harvey watched, several white-robed soldiers climbed out and

started walking toward the costumed performers under the big screens. A man who seemed to be the ranking officer—a platoon commander, maybe—started talking to the mouse in a stern voice. The mouse broke off his skit with the bear to answer him with an unconcerned smile (though, of course, that smile was just a part of the costume). It looked as if the troops were asking whether they had permission to be there.

“Looks like we should go somewhere else.”

Harvey nodded and stood up. “Yeah.” They should avoid any and all Church Soldiers for caution’s sake. At this point, he was way past having any particular feelings about that, but it was still a pain in the ass. He had just hefted two people’s worth of luggage onto his shoulder and started walking, radio dangling from his hand, when he heard a chorus of cheers from a different direction.

A bunch of kids had formed a ring around the rotary bus stop. They all held balloons that they must have gotten from the guys in the animal costumes. In the center of the ring was a bench with a lone girl sitting on it. Unlike all the other kids, she was hugging a patchwork teddy bear instead of a balloon. She glared up at them. They all looked older than she was.

“I heard this teddy bear’s the only friend she has!” said one especially large boy, beaming with self-satisfaction. The others took their cue from him and started jeering. Harvey couldn’t really judge the ages of the group, but the girl on the bench looked to be about five.

Normally he had zero interest in kids’ fights, but for some reason he kept watching them out of the corner of his eye. Maybe it was because it entertained him how much she reminded him of a certain someone—particularly in the stubborn way she was glaring up at them through her lashes and pressing her lips together as if to say *No way am I gonna cry!* even though she was obviously on the verge of tears.

“I do too have a friend!” All of a sudden she leapt off the bench and grabbed at the boy in the center of the group, seemingly at the end of her rope. It was so unexpected that the boy faltered for a second, but he was a lot bigger than she was, and he had no trouble pushing her away. After she landed on her butt on the ground, her face jerked in surprise. The boy had snatched her teddy bear. “Give that back!”

“Make me!”

She jumped up and tried to grab it back, but he held it high up out of reach. The bullies started passing it off to each other. The last one wound

up and pitched it far away from her.

The smiling teddy flew in a high arc over the top of a bus pulling sluggishly into the rotary. The little girl flew out into the street after it without a second's hesitation.

And right before Harvey's eye, the hood of a three-wheeled taxi suddenly appeared out of the blind spot created by the bus as it tried to pass. He sucked in a sharp breath.

"Herbie, wait!"

The whole concept of the radio trying to stop him was so unlikely (if anything, he'd assumed it would be haranguing him to go faster) that he froze for just a moment. But then his body started moving again on autopilot, so that momentary reaction ended up having exactly the opposite effect from what the Corporal had intended.

Kieli was watching a bunny do tricks when she heard the dull thud and the high squeal of brakes.

Well, the "bunny" was actually a full two heads taller than she was, wearing a costume of primarily yellow and brown patchwork cloth, and standing on two legs...When she'd come out of the restroom on one side of the station building, she'd found herself spellbound by its slightly precarious-looking balance ball act, clenching her fists and nervously holding her breath. And she was still standing there gazing when those two particular sounds came from the rotary.

An abrupt silence fell over the crowd, and then before long it grew noisy again with excited chatter and the sound of hurried footsteps.

Kieli was afraid something awful had happened. She flew around the corner of the station and looked left and right. People were starting to gather around a spot near the bus stop. Local boys, travelers passing by, bus and taxi drivers fresh out of their vehicles—everyone was standing at a careful distance from a figure on the pavement, staring at it with timid, ashen faces. A head of ruddy copper hair lay limply on the ground, and a bloodstain was spreading on the gray asphalt beneath it.

For a second she forgot to exhale. Then all her breath shrieked out of her in a shocked "Harvey!" as she took off toward him in a stumbling run.

Darting her way through the crowd, she knelt beside the fallen man. "Harvey, are you okay? What were you —"

Harvey sat up unsteadily. "Ugh. That hurt..." he mumbled, in the same mildly annoyed voice other people would use after nicking themselves

with a letter opener. Blood was pouring from the side of his head down his right cheek, but he ignored it to look down at what he was carrying. That was when Kieli first noticed the little girl cradled protectively in his left arm.

The girl didn't seem to get what had happened. She just stared bewilderedly up at him, blinking at the sight of the blood covering half his face.

There was a blank pause. Then with no warning, the girl's young cheeks twisted, and she began to cry. Kieli wasn't sure whether she was hurt or scared by the blood or just surprised, but at any rate she was suddenly wailing loudly, and neither Kieli nor Harvey had any idea what to do.

As they were exchanging looks of despair, a pair of sturdy white boots came up to stand beside them. "Are you all right?" said a voice from overhead. They tilted their heads up at the same time to look and immediately stiffened.

An armored soldier in white was peering into Harvey's face. Once he'd examined the young man's injuries, the soldier's rugged glove grasped him by the upper arm. "First things first, let's get you to a hospital. Then I'd like you to come down to the station and tell me what happened. Can you walk? Come on, get in the truck."

"No, wait—really, sir, I'm fine!" Harvey bluffed hurriedly. It seemed as if this soldier with his relentless, one-sided speech might drag him off before he could protest. Kieli ended up with the little girl by default. She held the child on her lap and called out after the two, trying to help. "Wait, sir! Please wait!" But another soldier took her by the arm and hauled her to her feet saying, "You two come along, too." She scanned the crowd in search of help, but their other traveling companion, the radio, had been left by the station-house wall with the luggage. They were penned in by the platoon of troops, no escape in sight.

Then, just in the nick of time, a completely unexpected person came to the rescue.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say a completely unexpected animal.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My apologies, sir," said the yellow bunny politely as he cut through the crowd toward them. It was the bunny from the balancing act. His mask wore an oddly mismatched expression, mouth curved up in a smile that somehow didn't quite reach his wide, plastic eyes. When he

reached them, he faced off against the soldier, who looked about the right age for a platoon commander. “These young people are with my troupe. We’ll take him back to camp with us and patch him up.”

“That’s fine, but we still need to interview them about the accident —”

“No, please, don’t worry about it. We all have plenty of physical training, so one little car accident is nothing for us. We’re so very sorry for all the trouble this fuss has caused you,” rambled the bunny, cheerfully but firmly taking charge of the conversation. Then he turned somewhat harshly on them and snapped, “Come on, rookies, we’re going home.” He seized Harvey by the arm, practically tearing him from the soldier’s hand. Then, still holding Harvey, he grabbed one of Kieli’s arms, too, extracting her from her own soldiers (who were so bowled over they let her go without a fight).

Harvey looked up at the bunny’s profile. Kieli heard him murmur something in a stunned, scratchy, almost tearful voice. “...Shiman...?”



The dim evening sun bore down on her from behind, giving her a long shadow. Kieli darted through the cluster of trailers as if she were trying to catch up to her own shadow as it moved along the ground.

They were in a rural suburb on the southeast edge of the city. It was different from the well-maintained urban area they’d come from. This was just a wide empty space of nothing but bare, rocky ground. All kinds of trailers were scattered across it in clumps. They looked like a herd of giant animals napping together, grouped into little family units with the children huddled up against their parents.



She trotted past the trailer that held their water supply and circled around the back, coming out into the makeshift watering place to find a tall, skinny young man sticking his head under the spout to wash his face.

He looked up at the sound of her footsteps. "Harvey, your clothes," she began, but the radio hanging from her neck started yelling before she could finish.

"Why do you always have to pull this crap?! I told you to wait, didn't I?! Don't just go off getting hit by cars the second we get into town! Pay more attention to what you're doing! How old are you, five?!"

"It's not like I was playing in traffic. You don't have to give me hell over it," Harvey grumbled, sounding fed up. He moved to wipe his face off on his bloodstained sleeve. Kieli hastily offered him the towel she'd brought. He accepted it with a terse grunt and started sloppily rubbing at his face and hair.

Apparently he'd cut the side of his head. It had bled a lot, but he'd just given her the same old unconcerned look as usual and brushed it off as "only a scratch." It didn't seem closed yet, though. Faint red splotches were popping up on the white towel.

"I meant to dodge it, you know. You're the one who tried to stop me. It's your fault I didn't make it in time."

"Don't jump into the street if you don't think you can make it!"

"Yeah, right. If some kid died right in front of us, you'd bitch at me for not saving her."

The radio made a distinct gulping sound.

"What do you want from me? You're always demanding the moons."

"..."

Things were starting to look ugly, so Kieli broke in. "U-Um, hey, let's get you changed. The troupe leader was asking for you." The radio reluctantly clammed up, though it clearly wasn't finished yet. Harvey subsided with an irritated little click of his tongue. Then he began to change his clothes right there, apparently not caring that they were in a public place, particularly since nobody was really around.

First he reached his left hand around behind his back and pulled off his parka and T-shirt in one tug. His bare torso was so bony it was almost skeletal, but still, the muscles were masculine and well-defined. Even though it wasn't the first time Kieli had ever seen this, she felt her heart thump a little, and she looked away as she accepted the dirty clothes and handed him a fresh shirt. He put this on with just his left hand, too.

Harvey's right arm was gone now. A ruined scrap of metal framework and cables bit into the stump of upper arm visible at his T-shirt sleeve, dangling there and cutting off around the elbow.

It was Harvey himself who'd suggested cutting it off, since it "wasn't useful anymore." The prosthetic had worked its way deep into the living flesh, so there was no way to cleanly and completely remove it without cutting off some more of his real arm. And since that was definitely out of the question (though Harvey had seemed to be actually considering it), they'd ended up leaving a little of the metal there instead.

They'd buried the amputated arm in a grave behind a bar on the parish border—Kieli had rescued it from being left on the curb in the hazardous waste container on trash day (and it had been a close save!). When she'd protested that treatment as cruel, Harvey had answered flatly, "But it's just a thing." That was his only response, but afterward he'd gone out to the back garden alone and hadn't come back for a while.

They'd left Gate Town, the waterway city and the gateway to the capital, a little over three weeks ago to return to the North-hairo parish border. Once there, they'd availed themselves of the bartender's hospitality for a while. The burial had taken place during their stay.

And now they were here in Westerbury looking for someone.

Kieli watched Harvey fumble one-handed with a fresh square of protective tape, trying to peel it from the backing. "Give me that. I'll do it," she said, snatching it out of his hand. "Turn this way."

"I can do it myself."

"Turn this way and bend down." She grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face her before he had a chance to say no. Harvey looked unconvinced, but he silently leaned his tall body down a bit for her.

When she reached out to brush the coppery bangs away from his face, she could see the unnaturally sunken lid of his right eye. He flinched when she touched it with her fingertips, so she quickly drew them back and placed the square of tape over it. It had a thin pad on its underside; they'd been using it lately because it drew less attention than something more obvious, like gauze or an eye patch.

Apparently it was going to take a while before his missing eyeball grew back completely. The "protective tape" was less to protect him than to keep him presentable. The caved-in eyelid looked a little awful.

Harvey probably thought the Corporal's chewing-out was just annoying. That was the kind of personality he had. But if you asked Kieli,

anyone would have told him the same thing. Not only was he down one arm and one eye, and therefore in far from peak physical condition, but it was finally striking Kieli that Harvey had a genius for everyday injuries—today being the perfect example. The fact that he didn't really care since they'd heal up soon enough anyway (which she had to admit they usually did) just made other people, like Kieli, worry that much more.

Once she'd finished with the tape, she reached up to finish toweling his hair, which he'd hardly managed to dry at all. "You'll catch cold like that."

"I said I'm fine. And I don't catch colds." This time he really did bat her hands away, looking peeved. "Look, I'm not a kid, so —"

But then his face went blank, and he broke off and stared at something behind her.

The instant Kieli turned to look, the two figures who'd been peeking at them around the corner of the trailer jumped in surprise and vanished out of sight again.

"You want something?" demanded Harvey with obvious distrust. Kieli heard the sounds of people prodding each other in whispers before they came back out into the light. Their footsteps sounded soft and muffled.

The shapes outlined against the darkening sky were so bizarre—short-legged with giant hands and feet, no waists, and disproportionately tiny heads—that Kieli gaped for a moment, but she quickly recognized them and relaxed.

They'd taken off their headpieces, but otherwise they wore striped overalls over patchwork bodies in different colors. It was the mouse and the bear. Inside the costumes were two men who looked about the same age as Harvey.

The mouse leered at them and scratched his head with a costumed hand. "Sorry, man. We figured we shouldn't interrupt your fun."

"What do you mean, 'fun'?" Harvey asked, furrowing his brow suspiciously. Next to him, Kieli let out a little squeak and took a step away. It was hard to tell whether he didn't get what they meant, or he was deliberately ignoring it, or what, exactly. He just glanced at her reaction and then indifferently shrugged off the subject. "And? Did you want something?" he repeated with his usual curtness. The mouse's face fell a little in disappointment, but he recovered himself and made a vague gesture with both hands. Costumed hands, naturally.

"Come play cards with us. The boss said you'd make it an interesting game." It was only when Kieli heard this that she figured out the gesture

was supposed to be one hand holding cards and the other hand drawing one out.

She privately wanted to warn them that Harvey would make it a crushing defeat, actually. But on the other hand, she hadn't seen him play in a while, and she wanted to, so in the end she didn't say anything. Harvey seemed surprisingly enthusiastic. He appeared to think about it, and then quirked the corner of his mouth up in a slightly evil smile (maybe only Kieli noticed it). "Sure, all right."

"Okay, let's go. We've already started."

The mouse led them along the trailers, and the bear walked next to them, explaining, "We start the real work tomorrow, so tonight's the pre-Colonization Days party." They both strangely resembled their animal characters. The mouse was blunt and quick-tongued; the bear had a sort of easygoing air about him.

According to what they said, the balloons and the performance in front of the train station were part of the promotional campaign for Westerbury's big tourist attraction: the theme park. Someone had once told Kieli that Westerbury had something called "hands-on theater." Apparently they'd been talking about this theme park, which was called "South Westerbury Park: The Whimsical City."

In addition to the park's standard attractions, for the ten-day-long Colonization Days holiday that started tomorrow they were going to hold a special carnival. Circus troupes on-site and off-site would be doing songs, dances, and street performances, so all kinds of circuses from all over the world had been invited. They'd banded together in this southeastern suburb and set up camp. One of them was the troupe of dancers and street performers to which the mouse and the bear belonged.

Their troupe leader was that bunny who'd been balancing on the ball outside the station—he was an old friend of Harvey's, and even though Kieli had never met him before, he'd already heard of her, which surprised her. As they shook hands, for some reason he'd told her "Thank you."

The hub of troupe life was a set of four medium-sized trailers. Only the leader had a light truck all to himself. They were probably playing their card game in the trailer where all the men slept, or else at a table set up in the clearing in front of it.

When they turned the corner of the trailer and came out into the clearing, Kieli heard the hushed sound of someone singing. The faltering tune didn't quite come together into a real song. It almost sounded like

someone just muttering to himself.

There was a particular snatch of lyrics that was pronounced with odd gusto, so Kieli could make out that one bit. Maybe it was the only part the singer remembered.

“Tick, tock, tick, tock...”

In one corner of the clearing, someone had made a sort of makeshift sandbox marked off with a square of concrete blocks. A little girl crouched inside it, clutching a patchwork teddy bear and digging at the sand with a little scoop as she crooned the “tick tock” song.

It was the girl Harvey had saved. She was the daughter of one of the female dancers, and the troupe leader said she was the only child they had with them right now. She’d tagged along with them to the train station today because she had no one to play with.

“Hey, Nana,” called the mouse. The girl abruptly stopped singing and looked up. She fixed them with such a blatantly wary stare that Kieli winced a little, but the mouse seemed used to it and cheerfully kept on talking. “You’re singing weird songs again, huh?”

“...It’s not weird. My friend taught it to me.” Nana scowled.

He snorted a laugh. “Uh-oh, here we go with the ‘friend’ thing again! It’s always ‘my friend’ this, ‘my friend’ that.”

“...”

“I feel sorry for your mom, what with her only daughter talking all crazy like that.”

The girl had been biting her lip and staying mum, but this was too much. “It’s not crazy!” she shrieked suddenly, standing up and dashing toward them before Kieli had time to blink. She ran right by them without looking, whacking the mouse’s costumed shin soundly with her plastic shovel as she passed him. He yelped and jumped. “You dumb mouse!” she spat before tearing off to the other side of the clearing.

“Dammit, that little brat!” the mouse hissed, hopping up and down on one soft foot. Kieli guessed a lethal weapon like that made an impact even through the costume. “It’s your fault for teasing her...,” sighed the bear in exasperation. Kieli stood a little ways away from the pair and stared stupidly after the girl. Instinct made her look up questioningly at Harvey.

He beat her to the punch and shut her down before she could even say anything. “Don’t ask me, I don’t know.”

However, she could hear a faintly staticky voice coming from the radio's speaker.

"Tick, tock, tick, tock..."

He was probably singing it more than an octave lower than the girl had, but it was the same tune—no, it was far more precise, and now she could actually make out the melody.

"Corporal?"

But as soon as she spoke, he stopped.

"So you know that song."

"Yeah. It's an old song," he whispered softly, but so happily that Kieli was taken by surprise...and a little sadly, too, somehow. *"I bet they don't even teach it in school anymore, huh? But there's nobody in our generation who doesn't know it. Right, Herbie?"*

"I don't."

Harvey's blunt answer was like a bucket of cold water thrown on the Corporal's nostalgia. The radio fell silent for a minute, deflated.

"...Of course you know it. Everybody's sung that song at least once as a kid."

"I told you, I don't know it. Why are you getting on my case about it?" She could see his mood sour right in front of her eyes at what he considered persistent interrogation, and she was a little afraid they'd fight again. The Corporal must have been only too painfully aware of that side of Harvey's personality, though, so he didn't push it. But he didn't seem satisfied, either, and Kieli heard him grumbling wordless static for a while afterward.

It had been ages since Kieli had last seen the familiar sight of Harvey showing off his perfect poker face and sweeping good luck with cards (Kieli was pretty sure he used up *all* his luck on cards), yet somehow managing to make stupid mistakes out of the blue and lose everything at the last minute. That night she watched the card game up close until somewhere along the line she fell asleep.



"Tick, tock, tick, tock..."

She could hear someone singing. An innocent, childlike girl's voice. But it didn't seem like the same girl she'd seen in the sandbox last night.

She was hitting the pitches better than last night's girl because another voice was singing with her, helping her. It was a man's voice, seasoned and a little deep.

*Ninety years without slumbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock
His life's seconds numbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock*

A little girl and a man in a military uniform were sitting together on a bench. It stood against scenery she'd never seen before, all of it bathed in soft, milky-white light. Toys were littered everywhere. A doll in a red dress, a blue sand shovel, a small green chalkboard...all of them were old and faded, but they radiated warmth.

Am I in a park...? No, this looks like someone's backyard.

The girl forgot the words to the next verse and got stuck. When the soldier told her just the first line, she promptly started singing again in clumsy but clear tones. His low voice joined her after a fraction of a beat. Whenever she lost the thread he gently gave her a hint, watching over her, ready to catch her if she stumbled. But inside he felt impatient, and he couldn't help wanting to meddle even more. Kieli could tell, and she thought it was funny.

"It's gotten chilly out there. Why don't you come inside?" called a woman's voice from the house. She sounded kind.

"Sure," answered the soldier, standing up from the bench. When he turned to look at the girl next to him, she was holding up both arms beseechingly. He smiled. "What am I going to do with you?" He bent over a little and started to pick her up—

—When crackling black noise particles began filling up the white light, and the world fizzled out.



When Kieli opened her eyes, she saw a low gray ceiling overhead.

Where am I? She turned her head on the lumpy pillow to look left once,

then right once, and then remembered that she was in the trailer where the women from the troupe slept. Her memories of the night before were kind of fuzzy, but she had the idea that Harvey had carried her here, and that in her half-asleep daze she'd heard him ask someone to take care of her.

The back door of the trailer had been left half-open, letting in thin beams of sand-colored sunlight. It looked as though the sun was high in the sky already. Everyone else had long since gotten out of bed. All the other pallets were empty, already neatly stacked against the wall.

Oh no, I overslept! Kieli pushed herself up on one elbow. Her back immediately creaked painfully where it had been pressed against the hard cot all night, but her headache was even more awful. "Ow, ow, ow..." she moaned, clutching her forehead. Her head was pounding.

She was wearing shorts and a sweater with horizontal stripes. She must've fallen asleep in her clothes yesterday, but as it seemed like too much trouble to change them right now, she just smoothed out the worst of the wrinkles and made a perfunctory pass at flattening her hair before stumbling off to wash her face.

Cold air bit into her cheeks when she stuck her head out the back door. She could see her own breath. Winter was stealing steadily over the wilderness, and here outside the city where there was nothing blocking the wind, it was pretty cold even in the daytime. She drew back inside and put on her trusty old duffle coat before sitting on the doorsill to pull on her boots. While she was still tying the first boot lace, she heard a voice coming from somewhere around the side of the trailer. *Oh, good, someone's here.*

It had been so horribly quiet outside that she'd been afraid maybe she'd been left here all alone. The performances at the park were starting today, so the troupe would have left for work a long time ago.

Kieli hurriedly finished doing up her boots and hopped down onto the ground, jogging around the corner of the trailer to peek into the clearing. The space that had been so bustling with performers last night was deserted and quiet now, but she could see two figures squatting in the sandbox. One short, one tall...

The short one was Nana, the girl from last night. And the tall one was —

Kieli gave a little burst of laughter before she could help herself. Harvey, *Harvey* of all people, squatting there and playing in the sand with that absolutely blank look on his face...She giggled again.

“That’s wrong. Make it taller and skinnier.”

“You can’t make something like that out of sand.”

“But a castle tower is tall and skinny!”

“This thing is a castle? I can’t even tell.”

“It’s a castle! This is the clock tower, and then we’ll do the gate, and the throne room, and the king’s bedroom.”

“You’re kidding. Let’s make something else. Something that’s not all complicated like a castle.”

“*You’re just ham-handed, Herbie.*”

“Yeah, you’ve just got ham hands, Harry.”

“...That’s ‘Harvey.’”

It wasn’t like a conversation between adult and child at all. They spoke on exactly the same level. It was hilarious. Nana wore a jumper and a big, cozy-looking cape, and Harvey had layered a half-length coat over his parka, though below them he just wore his usual work pants. His empty right sleeve was tucked into his coat pocket, and his right eye was taped over as always. On top of the concrete blocks that lined the sandbox sat a tin watering can and a portable radio. Placed next to each other like that, they both looked like toys.

Just as Kieli was resolving to watch them for a little longer before calling attention to herself, she realized something important.

Didn’t the radio just talk like normal? Right in front of Nana?

While she was standing there stunned, Harvey noticed her and lifted his head. “Good morning,” she said automatically.

“Hey there, hangover girl,” Harvey answered, his face animated by just the hint of a taunting smirk. “This is what you get for tossing it back like that just because it tasted sweet.”

“Ugh...quit picking on me; I didn’t know!” Cradling her head, which was still throbbing dully, she walked over to them and crouched down next to Harvey. “What are you doing?”

“Shiman made me babysit.”

“*Looks to me more like she’s letting you play with her,*” jibed the radio. He really was talking as if it was natural, Kieli realized with horror. But when she shot a glance at Nana, the girl didn’t seem particularly surprised or anything. She just silently went about building a mountain out of sand with her shovel. If anything, she seemed put out at having Kieli interrupt their little threesome (well, twosome plus radio).

As Kieli wondered, bewildered, if maybe Nana had decided to hate her,

Harvey stood up and said, "Okay, switch," as if it was time for a shift change. And she'd just gotten there, too!

"Hey, what do you mean, 'switch'?!"

"I'm going into town."

"To see the informant, right? I'm coming, too."

"I told you, he left us with the babysitting." He was always conscientious at the weirdest times.

"But—but I want to go look for Beatrix, too."

"You're staying here today. You promised to do whatever I say, right? If you won't listen, go back to the bar right now."

She gulped and clammed up. Harvey was being pretty obstinate about his orders, for Harvey, and she didn't have anything with which to answer back.

Looking for Beatrix was the whole reason they'd come to Westerbury. She was still missing. Kieli hadn't seen her at all since North-hairo. They'd waited at the bar on the parish border for a while, figuring that if she was okay she'd contact them there, but even after almost two weeks there was still no word. That was when the information peddler they'd asked for help (that man who ran the cigarette stand) had come to them with a rumor that there was an Undying in Westerbury. It was just a rumor, though, with nothing hard to back it up. Harvey hadn't been enthusiastic, but Kieli had stubbornly insisted that if there was even the smallest chance, she wanted to look there, and in the end, he'd reluctantly let her steamroller him.

However, he'd given her conditions: *I'm letting you have your way on this, so while we're in Westerbury you have to do what I say. Don't go doing your own thing and making trouble. Don't cause me any problems. If you do, I'll send you straight back here.*

...Apparently she'd totally lost his trust by getting herself involved in so much trouble all the time.

"Harry, you're not gonna play anymore?" Nana called after him in her babyish voice when he moved to leave the sandbox. She didn't try to stop him with tantrums or pleading; she just fixed expressive eyes on him.

Harvey stopped for a moment and turned back. "Nope," he said casually. "Play with her now." He jerked his eye toward Kieli.

Easy for him to say, but he was putting Kieli in a bind. She wasn't used to playing with little kids in the first place, and she had a feeling it'd be even harder to make friends with one who seemed so cranky. For one

thing, Nana sure didn't seem to like her as much as she liked Harvey.

Kieli looked up at him imploringly. He dropped his left hand to the top of her head and ruffled her hair lightly before he dismissed the whole issue with a careless, "You'll be fine. You're birds of a feather." *Hey! That's so irresponsible!* Then he turned on his heel and started to climb over the blocks of concrete.

This time the radio stopped him. "*Wait a second. What about me?*"

"Huh?" Harvey stopped one more time and glanced down to the machine at his feet. He was starting to look pissed off. "You're going to stay here with her, obviously."

"*Don't be ridiculous. I'm coming along. You can't be left to your own devices. You're an injured man with no self-awareness.*"

"You just keep playing with them," he snapped. "I'll be fine on my own." He plunged his left hand into his pocket and strode briskly away. This time he paid no attention when the radio shouted after him to wait. Was it only Kieli's imagination, or did it almost seem as though he was running away?

"*Dammit, that idiot just won't listen...*"

Tilting her head in confusion, Kieli turned to look at the radio, which was still complaining. "Corporal—" she began, but Nana pointedly interrupted her before she could ask him if it was really okay for him to be talking.

"Corp'ral, let's play!" She was glaring sullenly at the ground, digging roughly at the sand at her feet. *Yeah, she definitely thinks I'm in the way.*

There was an empty space where Harvey had been, so Kieli was crouching an awkward distance away from the little girl, and that distance was making things even more uncomfortable somehow. Though maybe it was only Kieli's general discomfort around kids that made her feel that way...

She huddled into a ball, hugging her knees, and timidly asked, "Um, can I play, too...?"

Nana glanced up at her without raising her head. She still looked grumpy. "Do you know the song?" Kieli was lost for a second before she realized the girl was talking about the song from last night, the one about the clock. The Corporal had said that no one remembered it now. It was really an old, old song that had been around since long before the War, even.

She recalled the garden from her dream, wrapped in soft fog. That

bench. She'd heard the girl and the soldier sing it in the dream, so she nodded, dragging the lyrics up from the depths of her memory. "A little."

Nana's eyes widened in surprise, as if she hadn't expected Kieli to say yes. "Did my friend teach you?"

"Your friend?"

"From the park. She taught me the song."

Kieli blinked. "Hmm?" Nana dropped her gaze again, looking disappointed. It seemed as if Kieli had betrayed her hopes somehow, but she had no idea how.

The radio sitting on the blocks took pity on her bafflement and clarified slightly. "*Seems like she met an old ghost near the park.*"

"She what?" This time it was Kieli's turn to widen her eyes in surprise.

"*Sometimes kids can see things adults can't, even if they're not all as sensitive as you.*"

"Huh..." She turned her eyes back to Nana, who was digging up sand just two steps away from her. Ever since Harvey had left, she didn't seem to be making anything in particular, let alone a castle. She just scooped up some sand, poured it on top of her little pile, and then repeated the process.

Eventually Nana said in a low voice, "Mama looked at me funny when I was talking to my friend. She asked me who I was talking to. Then when I told her to meet my new friend, she looked at me even funnier. Now I'm not supposed to go to the park while she's working anymore. So I have to stay here." Her eyes were still downcast.

Kieli silently gazed at the little girl's profile for a bit. Then she pushed herself to her feet with a little grunt. She took two crunching steps across the sand and squatted down again next to her.

When she touched the dry sand at her feet, it felt faintly warmer than the cool air, and when she scooped it up in one hand it slithered through her fingers—it was just like the sand in the Sand Ocean. (She had to admit, it probably *would* be pretty hard to make a castle out of this sand, even for someone who wasn't Harvey.)

"What should we make? But I have to warn you, I'm not very good at this, either."

She was rewarded with another upturned glance, surprised but still suspicious. "...You're not gonna laugh at me?"

"Why would I?"

"Everybody does. The people here, and the city kids, too. They all say she's an imaginary friend. They say I went funny in the head 'cause I

didn't have any friends and I wanted one so bad."



“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Kieli said, watching sand dribble from her fingers down to her boot tips. She knew it wasn’t a very good answer, but she’d never been a smooth talker in the first place, so she just said what came to mind as if it were a plainly obvious fact.

Nana’s eyes went big and round, though her expression didn’t soften. But before long she dropped her gaze to the ground again. She pouted, sticking her shovel upright in the dirt. “...I do have a friend.”

“I know.”

The conversation didn’t exactly pick up after that, but Nana did lend Kieli her shovel, and they started building the easiest thing they could think of: a sand mole’s nest. The two of them crouched there in one corner of the deserted clearing surrounded by trailers, facing each other across a little mountain of sand and digging together. Eventually Nana began softly humming the clock song. The radio sang along in a quiet, staticky voice. Kieli chimed in on the parts she remembered.

*Ninety years without slumbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock...*



What came back to her now was something that had happened when she was a very little girl living in Easterbury. In the Sunday school at church, they had always had snack time after class. It wasn’t much, only some thin milk and a cookie, but everybody looked forward to it.

The teacher wasn’t a formal clergywoman; she was just a volunteer from the women’s club. Even when all the kids were eagerly raising their hands, she only ever called on her son, and then she praised him lavishly for his answer. (One day when he hadn’t raised his hand, Kieli had seen her yell horribly at him afterward: *Why couldn’t you answer such an easy question?! You studied this just last night!*) Hearing a woman like that talk about God and the Saints didn’t impress Kieli one bit, so she was basically going to Sunday school for snack time. Her grandmother hardly ever gave her extra treats at home, since she was one of those kids who spoiled her appetite for supper when she ate between meals.

One day at Sunday school, a girl about her own age sat next to her, and they hit it off right away. Normally the class dragged on forever, totally

boring, but that day it went by in a flash. Then snack time came, and that girl was the only one not to get her milk and cookie.

Naturally, Kieli raised her hand to report this. “Teacher, you skipped someone.”

“Oh, dear. Who?”

“Anita.”

Looking back, she remembered the teacher making a strange face when Kieli pointed to the space beside her. Then the woman collected herself and gently admonished, “Kieli, everybody gets one cookie. You mustn’t be greedy and try to get more than the others.”

Pride hurt, Kieli said glumly, “It’s not for me. It’s for Anita.”

“...Listen, Kieli, I can understand that it must be hard living alone with your grandmother. But here, all are equal in the eyes of God.”

What the heck is she talking about? What do my grandmother and our home have to do with it? She’s the one being unfair, isn’t she? At that point, Kieli was struck so speechless with amazement that she couldn’t even feel resentful anymore. All the other kids watching her snickered to themselves.

When her grandmother came to pick her up, the teacher called her to one side and said something to her. After that, for some reason they started having snacks at home sometimes—and at school, even if Kieli honestly saw someone get skipped at snack time, she didn’t say anything about it.

She never saw Anita again. At the time, she’d figured the other girl must have moved away.

Kieli winced mentally. Even though she hadn’t been lying, thinking about it now made her want to blush. She had to admit that to anyone else, she must’ve looked like nothing but a stubborn, greedy girl.

Apparently from time to time, there were small children who could see “invisible friends.” Sometimes they existed only in the child’s mind, just like the adults said, and sometimes there was definitely something there that couldn’t be explained away as just a figment of the imagination—either way, they usually disappeared as the child grew older. But Kieli still had “invisible friends” even now. They were just facts of her life. There was her roommate from two years ago, the pretty, trouble-making tomboy with the blond hair and blue eyes, and there was the friend who’d stuck with her ever since that roommate had disappeared: the hypercritical, ever-worrying, sometimes-

helpful-and-sometimes-not spirit possessing the radio. (The Corporal referred to himself as her guardian, so maybe he'd get cranky if she called him a "friend.")

"Hey, Kieli."

"Hmm? Oh, more than a friend, of course!" she blurted nonsensically, startled.

If the radio next to her had eyes, he'd be looking at her funny. "*Huh? I do get that already, you know.*"

Kieli wasn't sure what he "got," exactly. It kind of felt as though he might have misinterpreted her as talking about someone else.

They were sitting side by side on the doorsill of the trailer and staring absently at the sky as it began to deepen into evening. With nothing else to do, she'd ended up remembering that embarrassing day from her childhood.

The comfortable sounds of medium-tempo music mingled with thin static flowing softly out of the speaker and faded into the late-autumn sky. It was too cold for them to play all day long in the sandbox, so they'd come inside. Nana had been playing with her teddy bear until a few minutes ago, but it seemed as though all the fun had tired her out. Now she was dozing off next to Kieli. When Kieli gently pulled the girl against her shoulder, she toppled into Kieli's lap.

"*How did you know that?*"

"Mm? What?"

"*The song. No normal person in your generation would know it.*"

"But, Corporal," Kieli answered, only half paying attention (the other half of her mind was preoccupied with worry over the right response to this unusual situation—*Will Nana get cold? Should I go get a blanket? But wouldn't my standing up wake her?*). "I saw you singing it."

"*You saw...me...?*"

"Yeah." Sometimes Kieli saw the memories or thoughts of the dead. It wasn't something she could consciously control. It happened automatically when their thoughts were especially strong, or if she stepped into a place where someone's lingering memories had been bound. "You were in a garden or something, with a girl about Nana's age. I guess that was your house? And there was a woman inside, too. Oh, was that your —"

Kieli broke off. She'd been rattling off the contents of the dream without really thinking, mostly focused on adjusting Nana's cape to cover her, but now she abruptly noticed what she was saying. Belatedly

dumbstruck, she looked down at the radio.

When she opened her mouth again, this time she chose her words carefully. “Corporal, that was...your wife and daughter, wasn’t it...?”

The radio was absolutely silent. Even the constant faint white noise that always poured from it whether or not it was speaking had broken off.

After a few blank seconds that felt painfully long to Kieli, the voice and static returned. “...*Oh. I took an unplanned trip down memory lane, so you ended up seeing it.*”

“I’ve never heard you talk about your family before.”

“*Well, it’s not something worth going out of my way to bring up.*”

“That’s not true at all! I would’ve liked to hear sooner. Why didn’t you ever tell me about them?” she asked eagerly before she could help it. The Corporal had told her all kinds of stories about his past, and yet his family had never come up. It wasn’t as if it had never occurred to Kieli before, but to her he’d always been a radio, so it was just so tough to connect him with a human family in her mind...

“*Well, you know. I died in the War.*”

All her thoughtless excitement wilted instantly at that.

The Corporal had died in the War. And that had been even before it ended eighty years ago, so most likely his family wasn’t alive either. In other words, talking about his family meant talking about people he’d died without being able to see.

“I’m sorry...,” Kieli murmured miserably.

“*No, no, no need for you to apologize,*” the radio said lightly, clearly trying to dispel the gloomy mood that had settled around them. Then he abruptly seemed to think of something, and his tone sobered again. “*Wait, hold on a second.*” Kieli blinked and waited for him to continue. “*If you could see me, then that means he could, too, doesn’t it?*”

Eep! She immediately saw what he meant. If she’d picked up the Corporal’s thoughts and seen that garden, Harvey must have been able to see the same thing. And she also knew why the Corporal sounded so disgusted as he cursed, “*Damn that idiot!*”

You just keep playing with them—it must have been Harvey’s version of being considerate, running away and leaving the radio with Nana. Considerate, and guilty. Maybe the whole time he’d been bantering with them and keeping them company in the sand, he’d been wishing for Kieli to hurry up and come switch with him.

“Nana!”

Kieli's thoughts were suddenly cut off by a woman's voice. When she lifted her head, she saw a figure in a water-colored costume jogging across the clearing toward them. Hearing her name, Nana stirred on her lap and blinked groggily. As soon as she made out the form running their way, she hopped to her feet. "Mama!"

Kieli gaped blankly at the woman who pulled to a stop, panting, before them. The costume had seemed "watery," she saw now, because of all the shimmering feathers covering her flouncy blue dress. It definitely wasn't suited for the cold weather, and she wore a blue shawl on top of it, but it still bared most of her shoulders and chest. It was the same dancers' costume that Kieli had seen briefly long ago in Easterbury (though apparently that woman was retired). Matching feathered ornaments wound through her short hair. She seemed like an energetic lady in her late twenties.

"Welcome home!"

"Thanks, kid!" Stooping down a little to greet Nana, who had jumped down and flown toward her, she turned a carefree smile on Kieli. "You must be Kieli. It's really nice to meet you. I just had to tell you 'thank you,' so I slipped away a little early."

"Oh, um, it was nothing," Kieli mumbled feebly, disoriented. Nana's mother looked completely different from her mental image. It had only been a totally unfounded image based on hearing Nana talk, but for some reason she'd pictured someone like her old Sunday school teacher.

"They told me you helped my daughter. Thank you so much. I waited for you two last night at the troupe leader's place so I could say that, but you didn't come, so I didn't get the chance."

Come to think of it, that's right—the leader wanted us to come see him, but Harvey went straight to the card game instead. I totally forgot. "Actually, I didn't really do anything. I'm not the one you should thank."

"I saw him this morning. He's gruff, but he's a good boy, isn't he? I'm jealous. See, my man ran out on me."

Nana's mother said this terrible thing offhandedly, with a smile. Kieli didn't know whether to smile back or not. Plus, the woman had called Harvey a "good boy," and there was no ready response for *that*. While Kieli was still casting about for something to say, Nana turned her sunny face up from where she clung to her mother's skirts and said, "Yeah, Harry's a good boy. He didn't laugh at me. And, and, the Corp'ral is a talking radio! Mama, is it okay if we go to the park sometime? I want to

introduce them to my friend.”

“...Nana,” a low voice interrupted. Nana’s face during this speech had transformed from her usual sulky expression into a merry smile, but at the sound of her mother’s disapproving voice the smile vanished again.

“I guess not, huh...,” she said, and clammed up again dejectedly.

Watching the girl’s mother, who seemed at the same time sad and frustrated as she looked down at her daughter, Kieli thought she did kind of remind her of that Sunday school teacher after all. Still, it didn’t leave the same bad taste in her mouth. She was sure it must just be the helpless response of a parent.

The woman turned back to her and gave a pained smile. “I’m sorry; it sounds like she’s been telling you weird things.”

Kieli shook her head. “No, not at all.” She meant that perfectly seriously, but she wondered if Nana’s mother thought she was just being polite...

The air between them was definitely getting uncomfortable. Eventually the woman said, “See you later, then,” as though she was trying to gloss over the situation, and picked Nana up. “I’m going to go change clothes. I hope I’ll see you again at dinner. You’re going to stay here another night, aren’t you?”

Kieli couldn’t answer that one, so she just gave a vague smile. They’d ended up staying here last night by going with the flow. Harvey hadn’t told her anything about what they would be doing today. Actually, since he did whatever he pleased and hardly ever really thought anything out in advance, she rarely got to hear about any “future plans” they might have.

There weren’t a lot of families in the troupe, but they did have a separate family-use trailer partitioned into bunks. Nana’s mother carried Nana off to their trailer, skirts fluttering behind her. Nana stared fixedly over her mother’s shoulder at Kieli as they left her behind. She was back to looking like a cranky child, but she still gave a small wave.

Somehow Kieli got the feeling that even if they were going to stay here tonight, she wouldn’t be getting another chance to play with Nana today.

“...There’s no help for it. It’s best not to get involved with weird stuff. That’s the average person’s happiness,” said a voice from behind her in an attempt at comfort. Kieli giggled a little. The “mysterious talking radio” who owned that voice qualified as “weird stuff” himself. She lightly stepped back up into the trailer. The small radio sitting on the edge of the threshold looked so old that if they let their guard down it was liable to get

put out with the trash any second, but he was their precious companion.

“I’m happy right now, you know.”

The Corporal gave a little laugh. “*Thanks.*” Still, even his laugh sounded kind of lonely. Maybe he wished he could have stayed with Nana longer.

The sky above the square roof of the trailer was starting to melt from the coppery color of evening into the blue-gray of night. Not long afterward, the other troupe members returned from work, too, turning the quiet camp rowdy, but the young man with hair the color of the evening sky never came back.



Gzzznnn...gnnnnn...

When he touched the nothingness in front of him with his left hand, he heard a low sound that reminded him of a machine gauge going past the red zone, and the air radiated outward from the palm of his hand like ripples in a pool of water. Everything in his body gave a horrible shudder. He withdrew his hand right away.

Harvey gave a thin sigh and pulled himself back together. Looking down at his palm, he uttered a faintly impressed noise.

He’d crossed over the bridge spanning the railroad tracks and come to a halt just before the downward stairs on the south side; now he was standing still. Every so often, a breeze blew over the pitch-dark tracks below his feet and made the fences on either side screech like plaintive animals.

He’d gone to visit the informant the tobacconist on the parish border had sent him to, but as his business had been quickly concluded, he’d decided to take a brief spin around town before heading home. (There was no way he could actually do a thorough walk around such a big city in one day, so he’d taken the bus a ways then walked back, and even *that* had pretty much taken all day.) On his way back to the camp, it had occurred to him to make one final pit stop here. That was how he had stumbled across this entertaining phenomenon.

He reached out to touch the nothingness again, then decided against it. If it were someone else’s problem that would be one thing, but this could do serious damage to *him*, which wasn’t entertaining at all. He’d been

attacked by a similar sensation once before. This was the same feeling of extreme instability he had experienced when he was shot in the heart with that gunlike thing made out of fossil ore or whatever.

Here was a strange magnetic field just like that on the south side of the tracks.

Is there something there...?

When he squinted into the darkness spreading out before the bridge, he could just barely make out the shapes of the crowded skyline. High walls twisting and turning like a three-dimensional maze and homes almost too tiny for people to inhabit. It wasn't that late at night, and yet the area was shrouded in patently unnatural darkness and silence. There was no sign of anyone living here.

So that's it. The theme park supposedly built several years back: "The Whimsical City." Central City, the hub of Westerbury, was divided into the north and south districts by a continental railroad piercing straight through its urban center. These days, only the north half of it was a functioning city. The northern side was actually plenty big by itself, since the two parts had originally been separate metropolises that were united during the War era. On the other side of the tracks was the old city, which was now in ruins and had been closed down for a long time.

South Westerbury Park had been constructed right on top of those ruins. A man who had made a fortune in the commercial district had bought the ruins off the city and built a gigantic toy town. (Harvey thought they were living in poor times compared to the high-level civilization before the War, but apparently there were people in every era willing to pour money into strange diversions.)

At the bottom of the steps on the south side of the bridge was the arched front gate, which was currently barred. The first of many puppet figures to greet parkgoers stood motionless on either side: twin dark-gray suits of armor wielding great swords. Once you were past that gate, you entered the park, the city of puppets—he personally had no interest whatsoever, but anyway it seemed to involve some sort of adventure ride where you drove in a truck through a dream world of mechanical dolls and eventually ended up at the clock tower in the center.

Looking down from the bridge, Harvey could make out a dark tower rising up from a hill at the heart of the park town. The giant clock face at its peak was the only pale point of light in the darkness. The hour and minute hands cast their shadows on it.

The only things moving were the hands of the clock tracking the sluggish flow of time and the fences as they swayed in the wind.

The park had long since closed for the night. Harvey didn't sense any *real* human presence nearby. Even the street performers he assumed had been greeting visitors in front of the gate or on the bridge and livening up the attractions had packed up and gone home by now. Other than the occasional rattle of a fence, the whole area was blanketed in silence.

But for some reason something felt vaguely off. Maybe it was because the air still held faint echoes of the day's commotion and the scent of the crowd...?

Or maybe it's a doll's presence I'm sensing.

Even Harvey was disgusted at himself for the childishness of this sudden thought.

He cocked his head and gazed at the empty nothingness one more time, that space that formed some kind of barrier even though there was nothing there. Then he decided to ignore it for the time being. He had enough on his plate already. There was Beatrix, of course...and the Corporal.

Great. I just had to go and remember that now, didn't I? He'd been forcing his thoughts not to go there all day long, but now it was back depressing him again.

He dropped his gaze to his lowered hand and balled it into a fist. He knew the Corporal must have been remembering it without any conscious thought. But that scene had been kind of harsh on Harvey. In war, people killed their enemies; that was just what happened, and he knew it was nothing but hypocrisy to feel like this now—but it still felt like a slap in the face: *you destroyed this happy family with your own hands.*

Harvey knew he would be chewed out again if he didn't get back to camp soon, but he couldn't keep his feet from dragging. Actually, he had already been getting chewed out before he left. He figured he was bound to get yelled at today whether he was late or not. He sighed internally.

Tick, tock, tick...

For just a split second, the wind blowing across the bridge carried with it a snatch of a song, so faint it was barely audible. He lifted his eye and concentrated intently on the darkness in front of him. He didn't hear any suspicious sounds. Just the feeble whine of the rusty fence underneath his feet. *Was that just my imagination...?*

“You could’ve just come before closing time,” said a voice suddenly from behind him, and his attention was yanked back in the opposite direction. Harvey automatically tensed for an attack, but he quickly realized that the voice was one he recognized and relaxed as he turned around.

Right around the halfway point of the long bridge stood a lone gas streetlamp. It was modeled on an old-fashioned lamp, one of those triangular ones, and it had a miniature human figure hanging off the tip. Maybe it was supposed to fit in with the park’s theme.

Beneath the streetlamp stood an odd figure: stocky and short-legged, with strangely oversized hands and feet. At those feet lay the severed head of a giant yellow and brown patchwork bunny, smirking at him (though he assumed that was a trick of the shadows).

“Shiman...” Harvey murmured. Then he fell silent, standing there stock-still and unable to think of what to do next. Eventually the other man walked toward him with soft, unhurried steps. The bunny head was left behind under the streetlight. It was definitely smirking.

“Be nice and bring your girl here. Don’t come all by yourself after it’s closed for the night. I swear, you’re such an oaf.”

“‘Girl’?” Harvey thought for a moment. “Oh...Hey, this is your fault in the first place for making us babysit.” Okay, sure, so it hadn’t even occurred to him to bring Kieli here. That wouldn’t stop him from criticizing Shiman right back. Shiman just let it pass, innocently huddling his shoulders to light a cigarette. This was a man about to cross the line into old age, a man with a certain dignity, holding his favorite silver lighter in the paw of an animal costume wearing striped overalls.

He’d waited a little too long to laugh, so in the end he just heaved a tired sigh. “What’s a man your age doing in that getup?”

“I got no choice. The kids love this stuff,” the other man grumbled, but Harvey suspected that he was really enjoying himself. The leader of the troupe didn’t have to put on a costume and personally solicit visitors.

Last night Kieli had breathlessly asked him if “that bunny person” was really the troupe leader. The question had surprised him, but according to Kieli, he’d been so terrible at the balancing act that she just couldn’t believe it. When he’d told her that before becoming leader Shiman had been a professional acrobat, her eyes had gone wide as saucers.

“You’re too old for this. Quit putting on costumes and balancing on balls,” Harvey said half jokingly (and half with serious worry). Shiman

guffawed and scratched his head with his costumed paw.

“Aw, man, and here I thought I was keeping up with the young folks. I guess my old body just can’t do what I want it to anymore.”

“It’s not something to laugh about. You’re going to really hurt yourself one of these days.”

“You’re a fine one to talk! You’re an injured man with no self-awareness. I’ve hardly ever seen you in one piece, for crying out loud.”

“...Shut up. Don’t change the subject to me,” Harvey snapped in open irritation. By some strange coincidence, his old friend had echoed the same thing the radio had said earlier in the day, and he couldn’t help feeling rebellious. But then he immediately regretted taking it out on Shiman. It wasn’t as if it was Shiman’s fault. “Crap, I’m sorry.” Even that came out more sharply than he’d meant it to, though. Apparently he really was in a bad mood. When he sighed, fed up with himself for being such a brat, one giant cloth paw abruptly reached out and towed his head in while another violently ruffled his hair. “Gah! What the hell?!” he bleated, shoving the other man off.

“Wanna go out drinking?”

“Nah. I don’t drink.”

“Shut up and come on. You can sit next to me and eat peanuts or something. It’s no fun drinking by myself.” Shiman whirled around and started walking off toward the lights of the newer part of town as if Harvey had agreed with him, which he hadn’t (and if his other choice was eating peanuts, he might as well just drink).

“Wait, are you going to wear that to the bar?”

“Something wrong with that?”

“I don’t wanna be seen with you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t bother *me*,” declared the bunny man calmly, striding off on his puffy feet. Harvey stared dumbly after him.

“God, he thinks he can just order me around...” He lightly shook out his tousled hair, gave up, and followed him. Maybe it was perfect timing. He hadn’t really wanted to go back anyway.

In contrast to the eerie darkness and silence of the phony town lying on the south side of the tracks, the view of the new city from the bridge twinkled with the lights of the windows, the streetlights, and screens on the walls of buildings—all the lights that made up a city inhabited by human beings.

As he caught up to the costumed man facing away from him and

picking up his bunny head beneath the gas streetlamp, Harvey whispered one last “Sorry.” *Lately I’ve been doing nothing but apologize.*

“Huh? What for?”

“...Nothing.”

Harvey guessed it was just about exactly two years ago during Colonization Days that they’d met at that carnival in Easterbury. He’d made a unilateral decision back then never to see Shiman again (and the truth was, he hadn’t come when he was called last night on purpose), yet now here he was imposing on the man again and being worried about just like he always, always had been. And according to the troupe, Augusta—who had retired and settled down—was looking forward to Harvey coming to see her baby. He’d only promised he would to get her off his back...

Why was it that, even though he tried to avoid getting involved with anyone, he was always being rescued by someone?



Wanna play with me?

It was almost Colonization Days. Mama and the stupid mouse and all the other adults seemed busy getting ready for their jobs. And then while Nana was playing “jump on the shadow” all by herself at the park entrance, a cute girl around her own age called out to her from inside the park.

When Nana invited the girl to play “jump on the shadow” with her, she looked sadly down at her shoes. It was such a shame—the girl didn’t have a shadow. But instead she taught Nana a song Nana had never heard before, and they sang it together. It was hard, and she couldn’t learn all of it, but she memorized the part that was repeated the most often.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

That’s her voice...

She heard her friend’s voice singing in a sort of half-dream and woke up.

She was in the partitioned trailer where she slept with her mama. It was dark and a little cold. Maybe the adults weren’t asleep yet. She remembered Mama being next to her when she fell asleep, but now she

was gone. Nana was all alone in this tiny space in the dark.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

Let's play...Let's play...

Nana could hear her friend calling. She was dancing in circles, stomping on her nonexistent shadow as she sang. Nana crept out of her pallet.

I have to go play.



“He’s late...,” she whispered. She could see the white puff of her own breath. It left her mouth to disappear into the blue-gray sea of clouds covering the sky overhead.

Westerbury’s nights were bright. Kieli thought they were probably the brightest nights she had seen in all her travels so far.

She was waiting at the entrance to their camp on the outskirts of town. She sat on the pile of concrete blocks that formed a makeshift wall and gazed up at the sky. The twinkling lights of the city in the distance faintly illuminated the sky above her, revealing patterns in the clouds.

The city lights were dazzling, but the nights outside the city limits were dark. Here, by the wall, there was just one blue-white light on top of a post a short distance away. By now it was time for the camp to fall silent as everyone got their sleep in before the early start tomorrow. Kieli had been helping wash up after dinner, but now the cleaning was finished and the performers had started going back to their trailers, so she’d slipped off on her own to wait for Harvey to come home.

She shoved both hands into her coat pockets without getting up and stared at the sky. “He’s late...”

“*Where does that vagabond get off wandering around taking side trips like this?*” answered the radio next to her with its standard foul static, but somehow it didn’t seem as spirited as usual.

Kieli had ventured out to the entrance to meet Harvey coming back, but she didn’t really have any guarantee that he *was* coming back today. He didn’t have the normal internal barometer of “sleep at night, wake up in the morning,” so he’d completely fall out of a twenty-four-hour cycle at

the drop of a hat, sometimes not coming home at all for two or three days.

According to the Corporal, Harvey had known for a while that the radio had once had a wife and daughter. He had told Harvey about them not long after Harvey had picked him up. (The Corporal was pretty evasive about this part of the story, but Kieli rather imagined that the radio had snapped and gotten violent and that things had been pretty crazy for a while.) After making peace and becoming friends (the Corporal said, again evasively, that they hadn't "made peace," but that was how Kieli interpreted it), they had come to a silent understanding, and the subject never came up again.

The song about the clock had been a favorite of his daughter's. Nobody remembered that song anymore. Hearing it out of the blue like that must have triggered the nostalgic memory without conscious thought on the radio's part. "Well," the Corporal laughed shyly, *"I've almost forgotten the lyrics AND my daughter's face by now, though."*

Kieli privately thought, *Yeah, right.*

"Tick, tock, tick, tock," she hummed to entertain herself. Her quiet voice disappeared into the air just like her white breath. "It was bought on the morn..." She frowned and thought for a second. "...How does it go again?"

"Of the day that he was born."

*It was bought on the morn
Of the day that he was born,
And was always his treasure and pride*

The Corporal sang for her, giving her a little of the tune. His low voice was soft, but right on key and comfortable to listen to. Of course she already knew that he liked music, since the radio was playing it all the time, but she had had no idea that he was a good singer, too.

Kieli pouted, a little put out. "I would've liked music a lot better if you'd been my music teacher." Her grades in music at the boarding school had always hovered around a C, and she'd never been impressive at anything musical. In choir, she'd always been given inconspicuous alto parts. "Did you sing a lot with your daughter, too?" she asked casually.

"Uh, well..." For some reason, the Corporal's voice got thick. "...went off to war before the baby was born, you see. I only talked to her once, over a video feed. She said 'I learned a song,' and she sang it for me on the screen."

“What? But...that dream...” Kieli blinked at him, not getting it right away. In her dream, the Corporal and his daughter had been sitting together on the bench in the garden, singing happily together...*So that memory wasn’t real...?*

She remembered then that the image in the dream had cut off at the end. It had been a fleeting dream, erased by black static right before he had picked up the girl.

“The plan was that I could go home as soon as I got leave, but in the end, well, I never got to see her.”

“Oh...”

“Herbie doesn’t know this, all right? Honestly, I don’t know why I have to be the considerate one—that idiot is such a pain.”

The Corporal’s voice was as cheerful as ever, so Kieli pulled herself together and nodded. “Yeah.” *Even if all the Corporal does is complain, he really does like Harvey.* She giggled wryly to herself.

“Quit calling me an idiot. What are you saying I did now?” cut in a voice behind them. Kieli’s heart leapt in her chest, and she and the radio both squeaked at once. When she swiveled her head jerkily around, face unconsciously stiffening with tension, she saw a giant patchwork bunny grinning at her. Kieli blinked in confusion. For several seconds, she just stared into its round plastic eyes, and it stared right back at her.

When she raised her head to look up, a copper-haired young man was standing there holding the bunny’s head.

“When did you get back?”

“A little while ago. Came from the other direction.”

“Sheesh,” she muttered. *But I was waiting here worrying...* She’d wanted him to come home, of course, but somehow his coming home with so little fuss was almost disappointing. Harvey’s brows knit quizzically.

He thrust the bunny’s head in her face. “What do you mean, ‘sheesh’?”

“Nothing, nothing.” The patchwork cloth shoved under her nose was slightly dusty. She stuck both hands out to try to get away from it and accidentally ended up taking it from him instead. “It’s a bunny. You must’ve been with the troupe leader.”

“Yeah, he dragged me along with him.”

“Hmm...” Kieli peered up at Harvey’s expression from between the two long ears of the bunny head in her arms. His face was the same expressionless mask as always. He didn’t look particularly depressed, but it did kind of seem as if he was forcing himself to look blank. Or was that

just her imagination?

“...What’s with you?” Harvey looked a little bit uncomfortable being stared at like that. He averted his eye, letting his gaze fall on the radio next to Kieli—at which point he froze stiffly. The radio’s speaker stopped its static, too. There was an unnatural silence between them.

“Look —”

“*Now look here, Herb —*”

They both started to say something at the same time, and they both cut off at the same time. There was another awkward pause.

Now it seemed as though they were both struggling to come up with what to say next, but fortunately (or unfortunately), just at that moment footsteps sounded behind Harvey and a voice called after them, effectively ending the conversation. “Harvey! Oh, Kieli, there you are, too.”

Two figures approached them out of the darkness of the sleeping camp. The first one was Shiman, the troupe leader, though she didn’t recognize him right away without his costume. The woman behind him and to the side was Nana’s mother. As soon as she recognized them, she pushed past Shiman and ran up to them. “Kieli!”

“Uh, yes?!” The woman clutched her by both arms. Kieli instinctively flinched. “What’s wrong —”

“Where’s Nana?”

She blinked at the sudden question and refocused on the woman’s face. “What?”

“She’s not in the trailer. I’ve been looking for her for a while, but I can’t find her anywhere in the camp, and I thought maybe she’d be with you.”

“No, um, she’s not...”

Nana’s mother’s face crumpled at Kieli’s answer as if she were about to cry at any second. Kieli was afraid that she was about to say *Don’t lie to me, you took her off somewhere, didn’t you?*—but Harvey’s voice stopped the conversation short before Kieli had to hear those awful words. It was his same old offhand way of speaking, but the voice itself was sharp enough to cut right through the strained atmosphere that had been building between them. “I’ll go look for her.”

Before he had even finished his sentence, he had already levered himself effortlessly over the blocks with his left hand. “Me, too!” Kieli cried, hastily scrambling down after him. Beside her, the radio spat out a short self-assertive burst of static. Harvey had set off running the moment

his feet touched the ground, but he paused for a moment, turned back to them, snatched up the radio's cord, and spared Kieli only a brief "You follow us" before dashing off.

The whole thing had taken hardly more than two seconds.

Kieli stood there for a few beats gawking like an idiot, still holding the bunny head, before snapping out of it with a little squeak and shoving the head into Shiman's arms. "I'll go look for her," she echoed, then took off after Harvey. He was already quite a ways ahead of her.

She didn't know whether it was reason or just some kind of instinct, but—they were heading for the park.



Let's play...Let's play...

Chilly wind whooshed past her, making the hem of her pajamas flutter.

It was cold on the bridge; Nana's cheeks were freezing before she knew it. She had forgotten to put on the warm cape that Mama had bought for her.

There was a girl standing at the bottom of the stairs in front of the big gate. With the cool suits of armor on either side of her like that, she looked like a princess from a storybook being protected by her knights. The suits of armor had shadows, but the girl didn't, and Nana felt sorry for the princess who couldn't play shadow-stomping with anybody.

"Wanna play?"

"Yeah. That's what I came for."

Nana and her friend nodded at each other, one on top of the bridge and one at the bottom.

Nana's friend's voice beckoned, *Come on, come on. Let's play, let's play...*, so she started to climb down the stairs. The steps were really tall, and she teetered as she went. One step, two steps—

"*Nana!*" called a voice from behind her on the second step, and then someone grabbed her arm. She was pretty sure the voice belonged to the radio man, but when she turned around in surprise, the face of that man with the pretty red eye the color of the evening sky hovered just a hairbreadth away from her own. Evening was Nana's favorite time of the day. Evening was when Mama came home.

“Harry, did you come to play, too?”

Playing was more fun with more people, but Harry just looked angry. “No. We’re going home.” He started to pick her up.

“But my friend —” As she tried to twist out of his grip, all of a sudden something really strong yanked her by the leg.

“No going home. Let’s play.”

Nana’s friend was standing at the bottom of the steps clutching her ankle. She was way, way stronger than Nana even though she wasn’t any bigger or older. Harry caught on to her from above to keep her from falling, but the other girl pulled so hard that she still slid down the stairs.

“Let go of her, you bi —”

Snap!

She was still pressed up tight against Harry’s body when something inside it made a weird sound, and suddenly her ears really hurt.

When he stuck his hand into *that space*, he was assaulted by such violent dizziness and nausea that his vision momentarily blacked out. Still, he somehow managed to grab Nana by the torso and drag her back. It felt as if he was pulling his arm out of some viscous liquid that sucked at his skin. As it and Nana broke the surface of that strange gravitational field, the empty air rippled like a pool of water.

“*Don’t you dare touch that girl!*”

A shock wave burst out of the radio along with its roar. The ghost girl who had been clutching Nana’s ankle flitted out of its way. Harvey took advantage of her distraction to creep back up the stairs, hugging Nana to his chest, but in the process, he accidentally let go of the radio. It bounced down the steps with a cheap, tinny clatter.

“Corporal!” He tried to go after it, but as soon as he had retreated to the top of the staircase, the exhaustion swamped him and he couldn’t move—and either way, he didn’t doubt that if he stuck his hand in there one more time, his mind wouldn’t be able to take it.

Harvey collapsed onto the pavement of the walking bridge and doubled over, forcing himself to choke back the nausea—it felt as if his insides had been churned with a stick—and the relentless ringing in his ears. When he finally peeled his cheek a few millimeters off the ground to check on the girl he held, he saw she’d apparently passed out. Maybe it was an after-effect of that *resonance*.

“Hey, Nana...” It only worried him all the more that he had no sense of

its source or the scope of its influence yet. He just hoped there wouldn't be any lingering complications.

As for the radio...

First he laid Nana down on the ground. Then he used the bridge's guardrail to drag himself up onto his knees. When he leaned out to see what was happening downstairs—

A small, horrifyingly pale hand crept over the lip of one step with a little wet squelch.

Clawing at the asphalt with both hands, the ghost girl crawled up toward him. Her sunken, dark, vacant eyes were fixed on the other girl lying curled into a ball next to him. Harvey jerked in surprise and then dove in between them to cut off her view. She slowly transferred her gaze to him.

For some reason, the ghost blinked at him wide-eyed for a moment.

Then an innocent, clear voice said, "...Effy?"

"...Huh?"

"Effy, wanna play with me?" With the rest of her face still frozen in that vacant expression, her young lips twisted up in a shape resembling a smile. Changing targets, she started crawling toward him instead.

"What—" Harvey used his one hand to help himself scramble backward, but his shoulder collided with the guardrail almost immediately. Those tiny white hands grabbed his ankles and began to reel him in with freakish strength.

"Out of the way, Herbie!"

A shock wave flew at him from below the steps at almost the same time as the warning. The bastard had told him to get "out of the way" and then given him no time whatsoever to do it. Still, he had instinctively jerked his head back just far enough so that the blade of air only grazed his cheek on its way to making a spectacular dent in the guardrail behind him, as opposed to taking his head off. The petite ghost was knocked into the air by the slipstream and tumbled down the stairs with a shriek.

The speaker of the radio lying on the very bottom of the stairs spewed a torrent of earsplitting static and inky-dark noise particles. They clumped together in the air above it, beginning to form an image.

Crap, he must have totally lost it when he hit the ground. "Corporal, stop!"

The noise steadily resolved itself into the shape of an angry-faced soldier. *He's not listening.* Harvey clambered to the top of the steps, still

moving a little unsteadily, and leaned over the edge to shout, “Corporal, listen! You’ve got it wrong! She’s not a bad ghost!” But the Corporal showed no sign that he even heard. The now-complete soldier’s form opened its mouth wide and sucked in a great breath of the surrounding darkness, and the speaker bulged up in concert with it. “Cor —” It was too late. The third shock wave rode the soldier’s bellow—

—Only to fizzle out with a little deflated wheeze before it had escaped into the air. It wasn’t Harvey’s voice that had gotten through to him, either.

The ghost girl had flopped down on her butt halfway down the steps and burst into gulping, hiccupping tears.

The aura of malice that had swelled around the radio abruptly collapsed, and in the strangely awkward air between them, the only sounds that rang through the silence of the darkened park were the girl’s sobs and the rattle of the fences in the wind.

“Hey, now, look. No need to cry about it...”

Having the soldier made of static speak directly to her only served to further frighten the ghost girl. She blubbered that much harder. The soldier’s ghost was at such a loss that he missed his moment to dissolve his projected body and just froze like a deer in the headlights in the air above the radio. Eventually, he turned helpless eyes up to Harvey, who just averted his gaze and sighed. *You got yourself into this. Don’t look at me...*



By the time Kieli caught up, completely out of breath, Harvey was sitting slumped against the guardrail on the far side of the bridge, smoking a cigarette. The triangular streetlamp cast a soft glow on Nana’s face where she lay wrapped up in the hem of his coat with her cheek resting on his leg. Her face was utterly peaceful.

As Kieli approached them, catching her breath, Harvey flicked his gaze up at her. “How’s Nana?” she asked.

“Just sleeping. She’s probably fine,” he mumbled around his cigarette. Then he gestured with his eye through the dimness toward the park gate beyond the bridge.

Kieli realized she could hear voices coming from the bottom of the steps.

Tick, tock, tick, tock

A girl's voice and a man's voice, crooning together.

She crept forward to look down at them, careful not to make any noise. A little girl and a man in a military uniform were sitting together on the bottom step.

Ninety years without slumbering,

Tick, tock, tick, tock

His life's seconds numbering

The girl's singing was clumsy, but she sang with perfect seriousness, as though she was savoring each note. His low voice joined her after a fraction of a beat, like a hand outstretched to catch her if she stumbled. When they got through the hard parts and came back to the chorus of *tick, tock*, she looked proudly up at the soldier next to her as if to say *See, I did it!* The soldier's angular face softened a bit, and he smiled shyly back.

Ding, dong...

Somewhere in the distance a sound like a school bell echoed. The girl stopped singing and raised her face. She bounced lightly up from the step and squinted into the silent park, and then with an "I have to go home," she was running unhesitatingly away from them.

Their parting had come too soon and too suddenly. Kieli thought a little loneliness radiated from the soldier's back as he sat and wordlessly watched her go...But then the girl paused as if something had just struck her. She toddled back to stand in front of him again.

"Bye-bye, Mister." She circled her slender arms around his neck and gave him a tight hug.

The soldier seemed taken aback for a moment before stiffly raising arms clad in grubby dark-green uniform sleeves and wrapping them around her as delicately as if she were made of spun glass. Softly at first, until he was sure she wouldn't break, and then a little tighter.

And then, with a tranquil look of such deep satisfaction on his face, he buried his face in her hair and—*fffft*—vanished into thin air, leaving nothing but a few scraps of black static behind.

For a moment Kieli stood rooted in place on the bridge, unable to move

a muscle.

The staircase was deserted now. The little girl and the soldier were both gone. Beneath the sky's blue-gray dimness and silence lay a lone portable radio.

“Cor...poral...?” Kieli whispered fearfully to it. She waited almost prayerfully for the usual staticky voice to answer her from its round, beat-up speaker.

The radio just lay there quietly without a word, as if that were the most natural thing in the world. She waited a little longer, but it still showed no response. Her vague unease abruptly hardened into something real, flooding her heart in a great wave and bringing tears to her eyes. “Corp... No!” She was just beginning to dash down the steps when—



“*Right then, want to go home?*” said a familiar voice accompanied by subdued white noise.

Kieli froze unthinkingly in midstep with her foot hanging suspended over the second stair. “*What are you waiting for? Hurry up and come get me,*” it demanded selfishly, as if nothing at all had happened. She glanced back over her shoulder at Harvey. Somehow this just didn’t sit right. Harvey had been staring down at the radio with the same air of arrested motion, face blank, but as Kieli looked on, anger began steadily rising in his normally expressionless copper eye.

“Let’s go.”

“Huh? Wait, what about the Corporal?”

“With any luck, he’ll get picked up by the garbage collectors tomorrow morning. Don’t worry. No problem there,” he spat in one short burst, picking up the sleeping Nana. Then he turned on his heel and started striding away.

The radio cried from the bottom of the stairs, “*Wait! Hey, wait! Don’t leave me here!*” Harvey showed no sign of turning around. Kieli’s eyes bounced anxiously between his retreating back and the radio until in the end she hurried down to pick it up. As she went, she heard Harvey breathe a sigh of relief behind her.



“Are you okay? I can switch with you.”

“Nah,” he returned shortly, though even he knew it was too vague to really count as a proper answer. Nana was starting to slip; he resettled his grip on her. *She’s probably a little too heavy for Kieli to carry.* A soft groan sounded just below his ear, and the girl twisted around to bury her face in the base of his neck. The feel of her breath made his skin crawl a little. For a moment, he thought about switching with Kieli after all.

They walked back down the deserted byroad between the park and the camp, making their way from one puddle of light to another. The streetlights were widely spaced here. Kieli had saved the radio’s life in the end, and now it hung around her neck by its strap just like always, playing a show from its favorite guerrilla radio station at low volume. As they walked side by side underneath one of the lampposts, they cast two hazy shadows of very different lengths on the asphalt.

The next lamp looked a long way off. Kieli gazed straight ahead at it and murmured, "You surprised me before. I thought you'd really disappeared."

"*Heh, were you worried about me?*"

Hearing the radio just laugh it off made Harvey start to feel seriously murderous. *How dare he sound so breezy about it? He doesn't have a clue how we feel.* "Next time you pull a stunt like that, I'll bury you in the sand pit and pour concrete on top of it."

"*Go ahead and try it. I'll haunt your dreams every night until someone digs me up again.*"

"...Really, don't."

In the middle of this exchange, Kieli started giggling next to him. "What?" he demanded, glaring at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Nothing. Just thinking how everything's normal." Harvey didn't even really know what that meant. She just continued smiling to herself over something. It made him feel uncomfortable somehow, and he looked away with a scowl, picking up the pace as if to escape. He heard an anxious voice behind him crying "Wait!" and jogging footsteps rushing to catch up. "Hey, let's all build something together in the sand tomorrow."

"Not a chance." *Where the hell did that come from? How old does she think I am?*

"Aw, *why not? Mentally you're just the right age for playing in the sand.*"

"I'm burying you tomorrow."

"No fighting!"

Maybe their three bickering voices were too loud for the girl cradled in Harvey's arm. She furrowed her eyebrows and mumbled something incomprehensible. All three of them winced and shut their mouths. (Well, one of them didn't have a mouth, but it was the same thing.)

They watched with hushed breaths for a while, but as Nana showed no sign of waking, they all relaxed a little (*Come to think of it, why should I have to act all thoughtful here?*) and Kieli whispered in a softer voice, "I just want us all to make something together. Like proof."

"Proof of what?"

"...Dunno, it's just a feeling," she answered, staring at the ground and sounding unusually serious. Harvey looked down at her profile, surprised.

He kind of got the feeling he understood, but on the other hand, he also got the feeling he would rather not understand, so he didn't ask for any

further explanation.

“Look, sir, they’re back!”

When he raised his head toward the voice ahead of them, a small crowd was gathered around the wall of blocks at the camp entrance. It looked as if a handful of other performers besides Shiman and Nana’s mother had joined in waiting for them.

“Nana!” As soon as she saw her daughter’s face, the girl’s mother was the first to rush up to them. Harvey mentally braced himself, remembering how unbalanced she had been before he had left to search for the child, but apparently the woman had collected herself. She did not try to forcibly snatch her daughter away.

Harvey handed Nana over quietly, so as not to wake her. Once her mother had taken in the girl’s sleeping face, her own face fell with the intensity of her relief. “Thank you,” she sniffled over and over. “Thank you—I’m sorry—thank you...” She bowed deeply. “Would you be kind enough to play with her again tomorrow? She’s taken such a liking to you.”

Kieli hesitantly nodded. “If you’d like us to...”

If by “us” she means her and the Corporal, that’s one thing, but is she including me in there, too? Harvey sighed internally and let his gaze wander. Then something occurred to him, and he craned his neck all the way around to look back down the road they had just walked.

The low steel-gray clouds stretched on past the shadows of the urban district’s cluster of buildings as far as the eye could see. Below them sprawled the city of the mechanical dolls. The ruins of what had once been South Westerbury, the strange magnetic field, the ghost girl who’d called him “Effy”—

What was in that place...?

“Harvey?”

When he jerked his mind back to the present at the sound of his name, Kieli was looking up at him curiously. The performers were already wandering back to camp, yawning. “Oh...It’s nothing.”

“Let’s go home.” Kieli tugged his sleeve, and he stumbled after her. He couldn’t help thinking their roles had started to reverse lately, which gave him mixed feelings—but for now he had more than enough other headaches to deal with.

For now...

Let’s build something in the sand pit tomorrow.



CHAPTER 2

WATCHING YOU FROM WITHIN THE WALLS

The feral kitten had climbed up onto the roof of the trailer just fine, but apparently it couldn't get down by itself. Its curled-up body had been discovered there, dead of starvation and cold, the morning before Colonization Days had begun.

Several of the performers had gotten together and buried the tiny corpse behind the camp, at which point that minor incident was considered over and done with. Soon no one even mentioned it anymore. He was the only one who realized that the kitten's shivering ghost had stayed left behind on the roof, though since he hadn't done anything in particular about it, it was just the same as if he hadn't known at all.

But something happened on the second night of the festivities, something that he considered far more important than any dead kitten. The girl who'd been staying with them for the last two nights, as a companion or something of the troupe leader's old friend (who didn't look anything like the part—more like a young man their own age), was standing in front of the trailer and looking fixedly up at the roof.

She was a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, rather plain-looking, but with something a bit foreign about her. Maybe it was the impression left by the contrast between her black hair and eyes and her pale white skin.

She didn't have any strong expression on her face; she just stood still there for a while, looking. Eventually her eyes flitted left and right as if she was looking for something, and then she disappeared. A few minutes later, she came back dragging a long, thin board from God only knew where, which she propped against the trailer wall at an angle. Then she stepped back a few paces and stared some more.

After a short wait, there was still no movement on the roof. Finally he saw a change in her face. She tilted her head to the side and gave a puzzled frown, then smiled just a little and whispered, "You can get down now."

A small shadow moved on the roof. Maybe it had been on its way to becoming a vengeful spirit: a hazy, dark clump of something like noise gingerly rested one front paw on the board. The paw was pulled back with a start, but then the creature darted smoothly down the plank to spring into a run the instant it touched the ground. Right before it disappeared into the dim night, the noise resolved itself into the shape of a cat for the barest instant and gave a single *meow*.

The girl expressionlessly saw it off and then began to clear away the board. She acted as if nothing had happened, but he could tell there was a

bit more lightness in her step.

Probably her companion didn't know about all this even now (since she didn't seem like the type who'd go out of her way to bring it up), but he'd quietly watched the whole ten-minute affair with his head sticking out of the trailer—through the wall.



The third morning of Colonization Days was bitterly cold. To the outside observer, the procession making its way out of their remote camp wrapped in white mist looked a little...okay, a *lot* strange. Patchwork animals, fairies dressed in watery blue, clowns in pointy hats, and more shuffled off to work, muttering to each other: “Brr, it’s freezing this morning.” “You look like you’ve got it good in that nice warm costume. Switch with me for the day!” Among the other troupes she could even see a band of musicians in dazzling fluorescent divided skirts and some half-naked (in this cold!) giants wearing chain mail. They must be street performers who did strong-man acts.

“Oh!” She’d caught sight of someone walking a little apart from this bizarre parade: a lanky redhead who stood out from the crowd in a different sense. He was just now breaking away from the group, trading good mornings with Shiman, who was carrying a bunny head under one arm.

“Harvey, wait!” she called after him. He turned just halfway toward her and gave her a look that, for all its lack of expression, still managed to be blatantly annoyed. He did at least wait while she ran up to him, but he obviously intended to leave her behind.

The entertainers passing by occasionally cast interested glances at them. Kieli guessed a one-eyed, one-armed redhead as tall and lean as a rake couldn’t help attracting attention. Though on the other hand, the “aura” or whatever you’d call it that he projected was actually pretty forgettable compared to this crowd, so he didn’t stick out like a sore thumb or anything.

“You’re not fair! I want to come today, too.”

“What do you mean I’m not fair? You can’t come. Stay here.”

“Aw,” she whined. She’d expected that response, so she wasn’t surprised, but she still pouted and refused to back down. *Today I’m going*

to get him to take me along! Two days ago he'd dumped babysitting duty on her, and yesterday he'd sneaked off somewhere without telling her (which was what made him unfair!). She'd accidentally fallen asleep last night, so she didn't know for sure, but it seemed as if he hadn't gotten back until almost sunrise. "If you're just going to leave me behind every day, what was the point of me even coming?"

"It's easier for me to get around alone."

"But I want to —"

"No buts. You promised," he shot back in a way that left no room for argument. Kieli glumly fell silent. She honestly hadn't thought he'd put her promise to obey him to such devastatingly effective use; now she really regretted it. *I never should've made that promise.*

"*I'm going, though. Take me with you,*" said the radio hanging around Kieli's neck once her turn was over. Harvey looked predictably displeased, but the radio ignored him and kept right on going. "*I didn't promise anything, you know. Take me with you as a substitute watch.*"

"No watch is that irritating."

"*Quit grumbling and take me with you. Take. Me. With. You.*"

"...Fine." Harvey conceded with a sigh, though he made it clear he was surrendering with extreme reluctance. He reached out to lift the radio off Kieli's neck, so she raised her own hands and took it off herself, just as reluctantly. If she left him to his own devices, he'd just slip into Harvey Time and forget to come home. It'd be a relief to have the radio with him, anyway, even if he wouldn't bring her.

She stretched up to slip the cord around his neck. Her heart started pounding without warning at how close their faces were, but—"Huh? You've got another weird cut." She could see it on one side of his forehead, hidden under his bangs. "Where'd you get that?"

"Get what?" said Harvey, touching his own brow with his left hand. He blinked as if it was news to him, too, and cocked his head to one side. "Huh...oh, yeah, I hit my head on a sign yesterday. It was too low."

"*When something is too low, bend over,*" jibed the radio tiredly. Kieli thought he had a good point. She sighed, half exasperated and half worried. *Honestly, why is he so unbelievably oblivious sometimes?* Then she abruptly realized something was off.

She figured out right away what it was. If the wound still hadn't healed by today, that must mean it'd been really bad at the time. She knew Harvey didn't pay much attention to himself, but surely even he would've

noticed something like that?

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, it’s just a scratch. Don’t touch it.”

“You’re such a liar. There’s no way it’s just a —”

“I said don’t touch it!”

Kieli froze, the hand he’d brushed away hanging suspended in midair.

She hadn’t expected him to reject her so fiercely when she reached out to touch him, and now she gaped at him with no idea what to do. “I’m sorry, did I upset you...?” Even to her own ears she sounded on the verge of crying. Now he’d heard her sounding all weird! *What should I do?* she thought, scrambling frantically for something to say next.

“Hey! Whatcha picking on her for?” called a flippant voice. Kieli turned around and saw a performer in striped overalls grinning at them as he walked past. Under one arm he carried a yellow-and-green patchwork mouse head—seeing it, Kieli finally connected the face with a name. Well, the nickname based on the costume, anyway. This man was called “Rat.” The bear that was often with him had a nickname based on his costume, too: “Bearfoot.”

Now the mouse and all the others were trooping by them, hooting and whistling and catcalling.

“Ohoho, what’s up? Lovers’ quarrel?”

“Don’t go makin’ your girl cry, now!”

Flustered, Kieli found herself blurting, “Oh, no, it’s not like that!” Harvey, on the other hand (*Did that “girl” mean what it sounded like? Which means that’s how we look?*), just called back an unruffled “Whatever” without showing any particular reaction to the word. When she darted her eyes up to his face to see how he was taking it, he gave her a brief glance and one last “You stay here” before walking off himself. Kieli might as well have been his dog.

The thick morning mist swallowed up his dull-copper head in no time, and she stood there in place for a while, exactly like a dog. More than one thing about that whole conversation made her unhappy, but eventually she resignedly made her way back to the camp. Busy as she was forming a plan to secretly follow him next time, she didn’t see that one pink animal costume had stopped walking to stare at her.

And that was how the third morning of Colonization Days began...



It was sunset that evening when everything happened.

A burglary...?

The performers had come home after their day's work, and the camp was getting lively again. About twenty people were gathered together in the central clearing surrounded by each troupe's trailers, talking about something with grave faces. Kieli recognized a few of them from Shiman's troupe, so she walked over and listened. Apparently several of the trailers had been broken into, including their troupe's. Since the place was practically deserted during the day, people didn't keep valuables there as a rule, so nobody had lost much other than some food. Still, everyone there seemed on edge.

"Maybe he was an amateur, if he only stole food."

"No, he must've been able to pick locks, because the storehouse was locked up."

"Oh, please. Lock picking is a basic skill for anybody in the downtown slums."

"Nobody saw this guy?"

"Oh, hey, Kieli!"

When someone suddenly turned to talk to her in the middle of a conversation she'd been watching from the outside, Kieli instinctively stiffened. She looked up to find the owner of the voice. It was one of the performers whose names she knew: Rat, currently not wearing his mouse suit.

"You were here all day, right? Did you see anyone suspicious?"

"No..." She scanned through her memories of the day. After she'd finished dealing with the troupe's enormous pile of laundry, she'd played in the sandbox a little with Nana, and then in the afternoon she'd ended up dozing off with the girl in her private trailer. The other troupes' trailers were pretty well out of eyeshot from where she spent her time, so she couldn't say about them, but if someone had robbed Shiman's group, it must've been during that nap. "I didn't notice him."

"Aw, man," Rat groaned, looking glum.

Kieli was miserable with guilt. *If I hadn't taken that nap, maybe I could've prevented this.*

Then someone said something completely unexpected: "Maybe you were the thief, eh?"

"Huh?!" She was so shocked she didn't even think to deny it right away. She'd never seen the man in Shiman's troupe before, so he must be

from one of the others.

“I mean, you’re the only one who was here the whole time, right?”

“That’s not a bad point, actually. Plus it’s weird that she didn’t notice it happening.”

Once the idea had been suggested, the others started to nod, too, and then all kinds of people were turning sharp, suspicious gazes on her.

No...Kieli felt her heart throbbing painfully. She balled her hands into fists inside her coat.

“Quit saying that stuff, guys.” One young man leapt to her defense, breaking the charged atmosphere. She recognized him, so he must be one of Shiman’s people, but she couldn’t quite remember who he was. After a beat, the name “Bearfoot” popped into her mind.

He seemed good-natured, and not actually all that tall for someone who wore such a gigantic costume. He gulped nervously when the eyes that had been focused on Kieli swiveled toward him. “I mean, you know, there’s no p-proof...” It was nice to have someone on her side, but he didn’t seem very dependable.

If someone much more dependable hadn’t chosen that moment to appear, the two of them would definitely have lost the argument.

“I was wondering what all the fuss was about.”

Everyone turned at the sound of that low yet penetrating voice. Behind the ring of people stood a middle-aged man in an overall costume—the leader of the Shiman Troupe. He was always the last to leave work; from the costume he was still wearing, he must have just gotten back. Above his humorous short-legged body, his rugged face was frowning grimly.

“Boss!” appealed Bearfoot in a tearful voice. Shiman swept an impartial glare around the clearing at his own troupe and the foreign troupe members alike. “I came over here because I heard there’d been a burglary, but maybe I got mixed up. I guess you guys aren’t the group talking over the burglary after all; you’re the group ganging up on a girl.”

“No, Shiman, nobody meant to—” An older man, maybe another troupe leader, tried to talk his way out of it, but he snapped his mouth shut at Shiman’s sharp glare. After one quick look at him, Shiman continued, addressing the whole group again.

“All right, listen up. This girl is a guest of my group, and my friend’s dear companion. She’s not somebody we hired to watch our stuff, and we’ve got no reason to suspect her, either. Now, if any of you still have something you want to say, you can say it to me.”

Threatened with that hard face and low growl, nobody could find their voices. After a pause, he cast one last look around the group and then nodded. "Okay, then. Each group will just have to be careful of their things. That's all we can do about it. So, let's call it a day. We all have to work again tomorrow."

And that was that. Everybody looked relieved, and they immediately started splitting off into groups and heading back to their own camps, chattering among themselves.

"You, too," Shiman said to his own people. "Go back and grab some dinner." They wandered back to their trailers. Bearfoot the bear hovered anxiously until everyone had left, but when Kieli turned to him and said, "Um, thanks," he gave her a shy smile and shuffled to catch up with the others.

When only Kieli and Shiman were left under the light in the clearing, an abrupt silence fell. Shiman gazed sternly around the camp for a while, but eventually he turned to her, and his face softened. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"I'm okay." *The other troupes must trust him, too. He's awful at that balancing act, but he's a really great leader.* She thought she could see why Harvey had kept up their friendship. "Um, would you mind not telling Harvey about this?"

"Sure...but why not?"

"If I cause him trouble on this trip he'll send me away."

Kieli was completely serious, but after a moment's stunned look, Shiman let out a stifled little laugh. Then he gave up stifling it and burst into loud, unrestrained laughter. His booming entertainer's voice echoed in the quiet night, and he hurriedly smothered it. "Sorry, I was just thinking what an interesting girl you are. I can see why you're so important to him."

"I'm not sure he thinks of me that way..."

"Nonsense. He's never kept one girl with him on his travels so long before, has he?"

Oh, I see, thought Kieli, starting to feel convinced—until she realized what else that meant. "Er, so that means he's been with women before, for short times...?" she started to ask, then trailed off.

Shiman sheepishly scratched the back of his head with one paw. "Whoops, I guess I shouldn't have said that. Well, uh...you know what he's like, so even if he has some whims sometimes, they usually don't last long..." He meant well, but he wasn't really helping himself.

Well, when she thought about it, she supposed she shouldn't be surprised. He *was* an adult...She was starting to feel depressed for some reason.

Puff.

Something soft touched the crown of her head. When she glanced up, a big bunny's hand was resting there. It felt warm and gentle, totally out of keeping with the stern-looking man inside. But just maybe, it exactly matched the kindness of the man inside the costume. "He's a troublesome little brat, but look after him, okay?" Kieli looked up at the man's face stuck on the bunny's body and pulled herself together, nodding.

"Okay." Then she pouted and complained experimentally, "But he won't take me with him, even though we're looking for a good friend." *Why am I saying this? Maybe he just seems like someone who'll indulge me?*

"Yeah, he told me a little about it." (Knowing Harvey, it was probably literally only "a little.") "But I imagine tracking down one person in this city would be tough, even if it is his hometown and he knows his way around."

Kieli blinked. "Hometown?"

"What, he didn't tell you?" Shiman scratched his head again, obviously wondering if he'd said another thing he shouldn't have. "I doubt there are any written records left, but when I was a kid you could still hear the heroic stories from the old folks. Stories about South Westerbury's invincible, immortal soldiers who crushed the North Westerbury occupation force and led the city to freedom."



The ultimate result of his three days of walking around was, "Yeah, I figured."

He'd actually more or less reached that conclusion on the first day. According to what he'd heard from the informant he'd visited that first day, about a month ago there had been a small stir about a "moving corpse" showing up in southeastern downtown, and that was apparently what had sparked the rumor that there was an Undying in Westerbury. There wasn't much eyewitness information, not enough data to make a definitive call on, but at any rate, nobody had reported that it was a blond

woman with blue eyes.

He doubted that would be enough to satisfy Kieli, though, so he'd spent another two days walking the streets of downtown just in case. But ultimately, the best result he could get was "Yeah, I figured."

Personally, Harvey had never connected the Undying from the rumors with Beatrix in the first place. He'd arranged things so that she'd be able to find out where they were through information peddlers, so he assumed that if she were really in Westerbury, she would have contacted them to tell them so by now.

Where the hell did she go...?

He'd told Kieli that there was no need to worry about Beatrix, but it was starting to bother him a little. She wasn't a nomad like him. She usually picked a city and settled down there (because cities were far more convenient, and—which was probably more important—she could shop in cities). It was hard to imagine that she was somewhere so remote that she couldn't even get word to them.

Which could mean that she was in some kind of trouble and wasn't free to act...

Dammit, Harvey thought hypocritically; *she causes me so much trouble*. Then he got the strangest feeling he heard a voice saying *You're the last person I want to hear that from*, and flinched. He wished she would quit treating him like a little brother already. She ought to forget about him and worry more about her own problems, and he also thought she deserved to be happier. Not that he would admit that even under torture.

"Okay, so I get that Beatrix isn't in Westerbury," a disembodied voice began.

They were in a narrow back alley squeezed between two high walls. The radio's freely aired complaints bounced off the ashen walls and blue-gray darkness, giving them an echo that made it hard to judge the distance between them. "*But what are we still wandering around looking for, then? And in all these back alleys, too—they're way too hard to walk in.*"

Harvey squinted and stepped over an empty beer case blocking his path. "...I'm the one doing the walking, you know." The other trash, construction materials, and assorted junk littering the alleyway made it even more claustrophobic. "I just got this feeling like if *they* were here, they'd be in a place like this."

"By 'them,' do you mean that supposed Undying from the rumors?"

“Something like that.”

“Is it someone you know?”

“No, I don’t think so...,” he answered. He couldn’t think of a response that was less vague than that. He wasn’t even really sure himself why he was looking. In fact, he had a hunch it would be better not to. Alarm bells were going off in his head that felt well past the point of “hunch” and more like some sixth sense telling him *Don’t touch this*.

But he couldn’t help it; something bugged him about the whole thing, and he couldn’t get it out of his head.

Someone had witnessed a “moving corpse”...

Unthinking instinct had him feeling the back pocket of his work pants for the jackknife he’d stuck there. It was a large one, specially designed for military use—he couldn’t imagine it would be much use against one of them if push came to shove, but it was better than nothing.

Harvey’s stomach turned. Attack weapons revolted him, and he was revolted at himself for carrying one around. He knew it didn’t excuse him of anything, but up until now he’d never actively carried a weapon, even if he did use them when emergencies arose.

Still, he had to acknowledge that if something happened, he’d be at an extreme physical disadvantage the way he was now.

“Hey.”

“Mmm?” No sooner was Harvey yanked abruptly out of his thoughts by a voice calling him than—*bam*—he crashed into a sign sticking out overhead.

“...*Learn from experience already*,” said the radio exasperatedly.

His forehead hurt too badly for him to even make a comeback. He held his hand to it and groaned. He’d smacked himself well and good this time. *Don’t stick signs on the walls of streets nobody ever goes down; that won’t get you any sales.*

“If you noticed it, you should’ve told me sooner...”

“It’s *your own fault for not paying attention, and you know it. For God’s sake, get it through your head that you don’t have a nice convenient body that’ll heal without any effort anymore. Kieli’s sure to get suspicious if you keep acting like you did this morning.*”

“Okay, okay, I’ll be careful. Shut up for a second,” Harvey snapped, sick and tired of having every little thing he said come back blown up to ten times its importance. He closed his eye and concentrated on the flesh under his hand. There was a sensation like tiny insects crawling around

inside the wound. Furrowing his eyebrows a little in displeasure, he pictured a fluid like coal tar crawling out of the cut and knitting together the damaged cells.

It was just a little scratch, so a few seconds later it had completely disappeared. The cut Kieli had pointed out this morning had already vanished, too. Or rather, he'd made it vanish.

There was one thing he'd learned to do to make up for the hit to his core's regenerative powers. As an unexpected side benefit of learning to consciously trace the flow of his blood and the regenerative particles in it, he could now use his mind to concentrate its functions on an injured part of himself and put enough healing power into it to cure minor wounds as well as he always had—though he had to use that technique sparingly, since it also slowed down the healing of his more serious wounds. He'd more or less given up on his right arm, but he was going to be in trouble if he didn't at least get his eye back pretty soon. It was even easier to bump into things now that he couldn't judge distances (or anyway, that's what he thought was happening).

He hadn't told Kieli about the crack in his core yet. He knew he couldn't keep her in the dark forever, but when he thought about how worried she'd be, he couldn't bring himself to tell her. Although he suspected he was making her worry plenty already...

"This morning wasn't good..." He hadn't meant to brush her hand away so violently.

"Don't pick times like that to freak out—save your energy for showing some reaction when it's actually called for."

"Such as?" Harvey asked, letting his eye wander around the alley. The radio was probably talking about how the performers had teased them this morning. As he looked up at the gaping wall of a building that could have been either mid-construction or mid-demolition and thought about how well-ventilated it must feel, he went on. "There wasn't anything to react to."

"Oh, please. Just give up and admit it already."

"Admit what?" He sighed. "...Look, sixteen is still a little borderline, right?" It belatedly occurred to him that as excuses went, that sounded pretty weak, and of course the radio just *had* to jump all over it.

"Hah, I see what you did there! So what you're saying is, when she's seventeen or eighteen there'll be no problem. That's what you're saying, eh?"

Okay, now he was pissed. “Give it a rest! I don’t need you saying this crap to me, I already —” *Wait, I already* what?

“*You already what?*” inquired the radio, as if reading his mind.

“...Nothing. End of conversation.” Harvey tilted his head up with a sigh, and his eye lit on a mess of steel framing built alongside the temporary wall there that must be several stories tall. *I should hang him off the highest beam and leave him here*, he thought, more than half seriously. He’d gone as far as to plan out how he’d climb all the way up there when he felt someone’s eyes on his back.

He turned around, but nobody was there. It was a straight and narrow alley, and although there were plenty of things in his way as he walked, he didn’t remember anything big enough for a person to hide behind. And anyway, if someone had been following them, he would’ve noticed them making at least *some* noise (even if he didn’t notice hanging signs).

He stood still for a few seconds and peered into the dimness, but there were no suspicious movements. Still, he didn’t think it was his imagination, either. What had...?

The radio seemed to pick up on something, too. A short, harsh burst of static suddenly erupted from the speaker. “*Herbie, there’s —*”

He’d noticed it and swiveled to look behind him even before the Corporal had the chance to finish. A blurry face appeared through a gap in the metalwork along the wall that no human could squeeze into, and then disappeared again just as quickly. *Wait, isn’t that —?*

As he instinctively jerked his gaze up, the whole structure crashed noisily down on his head.



“He’s late...,” Kieli breathed and watched the white puff of air disappear into the cold night air. The radio wasn’t here today, so it ended up being just her talking to herself.

Sitting on the edge of the block wall at the entrance to the camp and killing time was starting to become part of her daily routine. She thought Harvey would probably come home at a halfway decent hour today since the radio was with him, but he was still a little late. Everyone at camp had already gone to bed. The plains wind caressed her cheek, and its faint white noise caressed her ears.

Up until eighty years ago, these peaceful Westerbury winds must have been filled with the smells of blood, iron, and smoke.

At the time of the War, the giant twin cities of North Westerbury and South Westerbury had been long-standing enemies, and apparently the fierce urban warfare had cost many civilian lives. The North Westerbury army had invaded South Westerbury and laid it to waste; those ruins were the area south of today's railroad tracks. After that, South Westerbury had temporarily been part of North Westerbury, but once the surviving rebel forces had gotten their hands on a platoon of Undying, they'd become mighty. They'd beaten back the occupation force and not only liberated the conquered territory but seized control of North Westerbury, too; then they'd expanded on that success and invaded Easterbury. All the wartime ruins in the wilderness of eastern Easterbury were the relics of the Easterbury Federation Army's final resistance against the forces driving them further and further east.

There were no detailed records left of the War. According to Shiman, this was the story passed down to him by his grandfather, who had lived through the final days of it, when Shiman was just a little boy.

And Harvey had been one of the Undying in the South Westerbury Army's "*possession*."

I wonder if that means he was born in Westerbury...

Kieli'd never heard a single thing about Harvey's childhood or his family. It was even harder to imagine than the Corporal's family, and she'd also always had a vague impression that Harvey didn't want her asking.

Her life was nothing except things she wanted to know about but hesitated to ask about. What had happened in the capital while they'd been apart? Jude who was supposedly dead, those monsters like drowned corpses that they'd run into in the sewers below Gate Town—Kieli was sure those things must've had something to do with the capital, and with the Undying, too. Even she could guess that much.

She'd always been too scared to ask Harvey about any of it. She didn't know anything, but all the same she had a bad feeling about it that was weirdly clear: if she asked him, and if he told her everything, she thought she knew what he would say next. *Kieli, would you mind if I went to the capital again?*

In her heart, she shook her head in refusal. *No, I'll never let you.* He'd been hurt so badly the first time. There was no way he could go back. And

there was no way he'd want to take Kieli with him, either.

"...He's late," she repeated out loud. Now that she'd been thinking about this stuff, she was really worried all of a sudden. Forcing herself to hope that he'd just come in from the opposite end of the camp again, she hopped down from the wall. The only walls around the camp were the makeshift block wall that came up to around Kieli's chest and the walls of the trailers themselves, so if someone wanted to come in, they could get in from anywhere.

Illuminated by the lights scattered around the clearing, the cluster of long, thin trailers lay there like a sleeping herd. The four trailers that belonged to Shiman's group were parked a little ways away from the others.

Kieli started to run toward them, but she stopped again almost right away.

Who's that...?

She squinted into the shadow of a single trailer parked near the camp entrance. She could have sworn she'd sensed someone watching her. Wondering what they could be up to creeping around after everyone was asleep (and ignoring the fact that she was doing the same thing), something suddenly struck her. *Could it be the thief?!*

It could be the person who'd robbed them that afternoon. She'd read in a book once that criminals returned to the scene of the crime.

The moment the idea occurred to her, she froze in her tracks, unable to move. *Why would a thief be watching me? I don't know what to do...I'm scared...*

Kieli felt another glance fall on her, this time from the shadows on the opposite side of the trailer. She instantly shook herself out of her paralysis and took off running in the opposite direction with all her might. When she made it past the clearing, she took an abrupt turn and dived into the shadow of the first trailer she saw, then started winding her way between the trailers. She'd lost sight of Shiman's trailers in her blind rush, but she figured she'd see them right away once she got somewhere with a little more space.

When her lungs started to burn, she paused for breath, forcing her heart to stop racing and listening intently for sounds behind her. Even after she'd waited for a bit, she didn't hear any footsteps following her. Maybe he'd given up, or maybe it had all been in her head, and nobody had ever been following her to begin with.

For the time being, she was relieved. She set off walking rapidly, anxious to get back to people she knew. Madly hoping that Harvey and the Corporal would be home by now, she turned around the corner of the next trailer—

—And smacked straight into the thief.

They both let out simultaneous little shrieks, and then while Kieli stood there frozen stiff, the thief made a panicked escape into the wall next to her. *Into the wall.*

Kieli was left behind groping for a response.

“...Oh!” She snapped back to her senses and bolted along the wall the thief had disappeared into. *It’s not a person, it’s a ghost!* And the moment she realized that, her fear strangely evaporated, overtaken by a gutsy impulse to catch him. She had a hunch this made her different from normal people.

When she burst around the opposite corner, the thief was just slipping out of the wall into the gap between two more trailers. Kieli saw what direction he was heading in and circled around to cut him off. When he shot out of the shadows to come up right in front of her, he let out a surprised squeak and skidded to a stop, immediately tensing to dive into the wall beside them.

“Wait!”

At the sound of her voice, he stopped with half of his body sticking out of the wall. Kieli was at least as surprised as he was. She hadn’t actually expected him to wait.

He jerkily turned around, and she got another good look at him. When she connected his face with his nickname, she was doubly surprised. It was “Bearfoot”—the good-natured-looking young man who always wore the bear costume.

“You’re the thief...?” Kieli murmured, dumbstruck. A second later she realized there was a much bigger issue here. “Wait, but why are you...a ghost...?” Her own question confused her even as she asked it. *The thief was a ghost? No, wait, more importantly, when did he die? He stood up for me today when everyone was upset over the robbery, and he was definitely alive then—*

In no time, her brain was completely overloaded.

“Um, I’m sorry I scared you. I’m not a burglar, and I’m not dead, okay?” the ghost said, scratching his head and looking at once pained and guilty. Kieli stood stock-still, at a loss for words. “So you really can see

me...?”

He said he'd always been spiritually sensitive, but he'd awakened to this mysterious power about a year ago. He'd slipped up during practice one day and hit his head hard, lapsing into a coma for three days and scaring the living daylights out of the troupe and their leader—which he knew because he'd seen it all from above, so it had been a little funny to him when he'd come to and Shiman had scowled at him and snarled, *I wasn't worried one bit about you, you little jerk. I only cared about how I'd lose people's trust if somebody died on my watch.*

Anyway, he'd recovered soon enough, and to look at him you'd never know there were any aftereffects, but there was one. One nobody else could ever have guessed.

Ever since his accident, he'd apparently been able to separate his consciousness from his body while he was asleep.

“Then your body is sleeping in your trailer right now?”

“Yep, that's right.” He grinned at her. Kieli, still unable to fully digest all this, mumbled a noncommittal “Huh.” She was sure this situation—squatting against the wall of a trailer having a long talk with a ghost who wasn't dead—had to be seriously weird.

“But what were you doing there?” she asked suspiciously. Even if he was able to escape his own body, that wasn't a reason to be peeping at someone from the shadow of a trailer in the middle of the night.

“No, no!” said Bearfoot. “I wasn't doing anything bad. I just, um, sort of missed the right time to say something...” The explanation that had started out so spirited tapered off into silence. *Maybe he came to say something to me?* Kieli blinked at him, and he went on a cautious voice. “Er, well, I felt bad for you what with how he treated you so cold, so I thought I'd harass him a little...But then it came crashing down harder than I'd expected, and...buried everything.” *Huh? What buried what?* Kieli frowned, unable to figure out what he was saying.

“So basically,” he began uncomfortably, staring at the dirt as he rephrased it a little more clearly.

Basically, he'd accidentally buried Harvey under a giant steel frame at a construction site.

Kieli got as far as “Wh —” before she lost all ability to speak and just sat openmouthed for about three seconds. Then: “Why didn't you say so before?! This is no time to sit here relaxing! Where is he?! Show me!” She

was already on her feet and poised to run before she'd even finished talking.

"W-Wait here, I'll go back into my body and take you there." He winced a little as he bounced up from the ground, maybe startled at her ferocity. Then he started running toward the Shiman Troupe's trailers. Actually, when she looked closely, he wasn't really "running"; he was kind of hovering a few centimeters above the ground. Only Kieli's footsteps made a sound as she jogged after him through the dark, silent camp.

When they broke into the central clearing, she could see Shiman's four midsize trailers parked across the way. For some reason, people were crowded around the one where the male performers slept.

But they should all be fast asleep by now...

There was a figure standing on top of the trailer's roof. The men below it were shining flashlights up at him and trying to coax him down with cries of "Hey, what's the matter?" and "Come on back down, Bearfoot!" He looked more like an ape than a bear, wandering around the rooftop, hunching over and peeling his lips back from his teeth to leer threateningly at the people below.

"Huh. Look, that's me," said the ghost standing next to her stupidly.

Kieli narrowed her eyes at this total lack of tension and shot back without thinking, "Shouldn't you be a little more concerned about this?" She could see something like dark fog churning around the man on the roof. It was a hazy collection of static particles that didn't quite form anything. But every so often, the blur would focus into the shape of an agonized human face.

It was nothing but lingering regrets of the dead now, with no mind of its own left—vengeful spirits must've targeted this body as their hiding place because it was empty and soulless.

"Wh-Wh-What should I do?! This never happened before..." Just as the ghost belatedly seemed to realize how serious the situation was, a cry went up from the crowd in front of them.

The man on top of the trailer had all of a sudden leapt into the air. He flew over the heads of his flustered mates to land behind them and come running straight Kieli's way. "Ack!" She reflexively dropped to the ground and covered her head. Just before he would have bowled her right over, he jumped up again and alit behind her. By the time she turned around to look, he was already a good way off.

“Hey! Where am I going?!” The ghost man who’d been covering his nonexistent head right along with her took off after himself. Kieli quickly followed. The man they chased was really just like an escaped circus animal: jumping from trailer to trailer, making pointless circles, taking all kinds of detours on his way to the camp entrance. *There’ll be trouble if he makes it into town. We have to catch him somehow before he gets there!*

She managed to catch up to him as he was climbing the post supporting the light over the gate. His ghost paced in a panicked way on the ground below him. Kieli walked over to stand beside the ghost and looked up. She didn’t think the man baring his teeth and bellowing from the top of the post would understand her, but she gave it a try anyway. “Hey, come down from there, okay?” To her surprise, he fell quiet. Had she gotten through to him? She couldn’t tell. She motioned for the bewildered ghost to stay put and climbed up onto the wall of blocks next to them without taking her eyes off the man overhead.

Once she was on top of the wall she stood up and gently reached out a hand, doing her best not to startle him. “Everything’s all right. Come down from there.” He looked down at her consideringly. *I think he’s calmed down now...?*

No sooner had Kieli thought this than a bright white light struck his face. “There he is! He went that way, guys!” shouted a voice off in the distance. All that calm promptly went down the drain. The possessed man started howling again, and with no warning jumped down toward the blocks.

In surprise, Kieli dodged, sending herself tumbling off the blocks and choking with pain when her back slammed into the hard ground on the far side.

“Kieli!” yelled Bearfoot—or rather, Bearfoot’s ghost. When she lifted her head, she saw the body crouched on all fours at its perch on the wall. It sprang up and launched itself toward her where she still lay on the ground.

As she automatically curled into a ball, there was a ringing *thwack!*, and the man’s shadow was jarred sharply to one side.

Huh? Now he was lying crumpled on the ground where he’d crashed into the blocks. Kieli gaped and then swiveled her gaze in the opposite direction, where she saw a lanky redhead with a small radio hanging around his neck. A bent pipe, maybe a piece of steel framing, dangled from his left hand.

“Hey! How could you do that?!” shouted the ghost angrily, springing to

his feet and dashing toward himself. She thought she heard him wail, *And that's the same spot I hit last year, too!*

"How could I?" Harvey tapped the pipe rhythmically against his shoulder and said, looking really quite calm, "I should be asking *you* that. Do you have any idea how hard it was to crawl out of there?"

...Okay, so he looked calm, but he was subtly but surely pissed off. Now that she got a good look at them, Kieli realized both Harvey and the radio were covered with dust and looked as tattered as a couple of cave explorers. The radio's fitful static sounded almost like living breath, and with each burst its speaker was spewing angry noise.

"No, um, that was an unfortunate accident, and..." The ghost scurried to hide behind his own felled body (which seemed kind of wrong, really). Harvey took a single, silent step toward him, steel pipe still dangling from his grip. Air gathered itself around the radio in a sort of giant inhale.

And then the shock wave zinged by a hair's breadth above his head and careened up into the sky, where the black fog that had been approaching from overhead scattered as if to escape. It occurred to Kieli that the man's body hadn't moved from where it had hit the ground. The blow to his head must have driven out the spirits possessing him.

"Just get the hell back in there!"

"R-Right!" Flinching at Harvey's roar, the ghost hastily disappeared back inside himself—

—Or at least, that's what Kieli had expected; in reality he only lay frozen there covering his own body, and a few moments later they were still waiting for something to happen. The fog above them began swarming together again.

"What are you waiting for? Hurry it up."

"Um, the thing is...I can't get back in."

"What are you talking about?" Harvey demanded, eyebrow twitching in irritation.

Bearfoot looked dismayed. "I've always been able to go back whenever I felt like it, but it's not working now...Wh-What should I do? How do I get back?!"

"How should I know?!"

"Calm down and think of something fun! What you want to do once you're back inside your body, or something!"

"Huh?! Who's that talking?!"

"Shut up and get a move on!"

After this confused exchange, everybody piped down at once, and a sort of absurd silence fell.

“...Um, okay, then,” said the ghost nervously. “Is it all right if I ask Kieli out on a date...?”

Kieli had been gawking from the sidelines for the whole conversation, so when she heard her own name come up out of the blue like that she let out an involuntary squeak of surprise. “Huh?” She found herself sneaking a glance at Harvey’s face, but unsurprisingly, there was no change in his expression.

His voice, when it came, was dangerously low, though. “...If you never want to see your body again, that’s fine by me.” A menacing aura swelled up around the radio, as if it were in agreement.

“Wah!” cried the ghost, covering his head. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” The shock wave (really and truly!) flew at him, and he vanished just in the nick of time as it sliced viciously through the spot he’d been occupying a split second before.

“Oh, I see him! Over this way!” Shouts and beams of light flew back and forth from within the camp, coming closer to them.

“Ow, ow, ow...Sheesh, I’ve got a big lump on my head now...,” the man grumbled as he sat up, clutching his head. By the time the others had made it over to them, the situation finally seemed salvageable.

When Kieli looked up she could still see the black fog floating bitterly above them, but soon it dissipated, as if it was scared of all those people and lights.

Kieli jogged through the silence and crisp, cold air of the clearing before dawn and slowed to a stop just before the camp entrance.

Oh, good, he’s here...

A redheaded man was perched lightly on the wall of blocks, gazing toward the city. When Kieli walked over to him, panting a little, he stilled his hand in the act of raising it to light his cigarette and turned around. He frowned immediately at the sight of her. “...Why aren’t you dressed warmer?”

“Oh!” She looked down at her shorts and camisole top and started spouting flustered excuses. “I saw you coming out here, so I was in a hurry —” She really couldn’t deny that it’d been careless to come out here dressed so lightly. She’d only run a short distance, and her bare arms and shoulders were already freezing. She could see her own breath.

When she'd woken up in the middle of the night and peeked out the trailer door to try to guess what time it was, Harvey was just passing by toward the clearing. She'd darted out after him without stopping for anything, so not only had she come without a coat, she'd even left the radio sitting by her pillow.

"You didn't have to rush."

"But I thought you were going to leave without telling me again."

"I'm done going out for today." Kieli thought that by the clock it wasn't a *done for today* sort of a time so much as a *today hasn't even started yet* sort of a time, but Harvey seemed to define "day" according to his own rights—and pretty loosely, at that. Apparently to him, the possession incident (which had been unconvincingly passed off as a sleepwalking fit) counted as part of "today."

"Can I sit next to you?" Kieli asked hesitantly.

"You don't have to ask." It wasn't a very welcoming answer: not a *no*, but not really a *yes*, either. Still, when Kieli moved to clamber up the wall herself, he took her hand and pulled her up.

She sat on top of the blocks with her legs hanging down on the city side, her back to the camp. They were close enough that her bare shoulder was almost-but-not-quite touching the sleeve of Harvey's jacket. Feeling a tiny bit shy, she watched the city skyline in the distance lighten steadily from blue-gray night to the thin, sandy color of early morning. This borderline time between yesterday and today was the only time when all Westerbury slept quietly, even the "new city" with its glitzy lights that stayed on deep into the night. It was like the whole city was resting up for the start of a new day.

Kieli felt a rustling next to her, and then Harvey was shoving his coat at her. "I'm getting cold looking at you," he said, keeping his gaze straight ahead. She sat feeling confused at how distant he sounded for a moment before she took it gratefully. The half-length men's coat was too big for Kieli in several different ways. It smelled like smoke.

"Aren't you cold?"

"No," answered Harvey shortly and indistinctly around his cigarette, tucking his empty right sleeve back into the pocket of his parka. Kieli sighed internally. As usual, it was hard to tell whether he was being kind or cold.

...Speaking of which, had she been right that he was angry last night? When Bearfoot had asked if he could take her on a date? But then again,

he was probably angry about being almost buried alive.

She sneaked a glance up at his profile, but she'd sat down on his right side, so the white medical tape over his eye was in her way, and she couldn't read his expression. Not that he was even wearing an expression, probably. Maybe Harvey noticed her looking and maybe he didn't; he was totally nonchalant as he tilted his head back to look up at the brightening sky and blow out a puff of smoke—

“Ah!”

As Kieli watched, he overbalanced and tumbled backward off the wall.

The noise he made when he hit the ground sounded really painful.

“Harvey?!” she shrieked, more startled than he was. Then she hopped quickly down from the blocks and back into the camp. Crouching over him as he cradled his head in a stupor and groaned, she asked him, “Are you okay? Sheesh, what were you even doing?”

“I was just—” Harvey began, and then stiffly cut himself off. “Nothing.”

He was averting his eye for some reason, so she looked down at herself, saw the way her camisole top was sitting, and discreetly pulled the coat closed. “Oh.” *Not that I have much to show off anyway. Hardly anything to show off, really.*



Neither of them said anything for a moment. As the air between them grew slightly strained, Kieli heard a voice sigh, "Talk about lucky..." Looking around, she spotted a man's severed head peeking out of the wall of a trailer a short distance away.

Harvey sat up with a jerk. "You just never learn, do you?!" The man instantly yanked his head back and disappeared with a little bleat of nervousness. Harvey made a disgusted noise and put a hand to the back of his head, shaking off the dizziness. "God, he's got some nerve..." He hoisted himself easily to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Kieli asked, still squatting on the ground.

"Back to the trailer to smack him awake."

And with that, he stalked off toward the campsite. He didn't show any inclination to wait for Kieli, so she hurried to stand up, catching her knee on the too-big coat and almost tripping back to the ground in the process.

She could still feel a lingering trace of its owner's warmth against her skin. She couldn't help thinking, not about how snug it made her feel now, but how much colder she'd feel in a little while when it faded. It made her more anxious when he was kind than when he wasn't. She almost thought it might be best if he was just always curt with her.

"Hey, what were you about to say before?"

"I didn't say anything," Harvey answered without turning around.

Kieli pouted at his tall back. "Liar!" But all the same, somehow it was a relief to hear the kind of answer he always gave. She went after him, shaking the dust off of his jacket.

The lights in the clearing were still on, but they were already blending into the color of the early-morning sky and losing their meaning. The world had crossed the threshold between yesterday and today, and another bustling Westerbury day was dawning.

CHAPTER 3

REAL UNDYING

His body was filled with heat and pain. It felt as if the fluids in his body were boiling, melting every last cell one by one.

The agony almost exploding out of him made him want to fall to the ground and writhe, yet at the same time he was haunted by the uneasy feeling that this body wasn't his at all. His mind was controlling his feet from somewhere a long way off, pushing or dragging one in front of the other to propel him forward. The soles of his shoes were so worn out they hardly existed anymore; the scrape-slap of his footsteps echoed eerily through the darkened streets of downtown.

He'd walked a mind-boggling distance already, telling himself all the while *Just try for a little longer.*

Just a little longer,

Just a little longer,

Just a little longer...

"...It's our building..."

He wondered how long it had been since he'd last spoken. A long time, anyway. The sound he squeezed out of his throat now came out low and flat, like a tape played on a dying recorder. His tongue was thick, tripping over the words, and they sounded horribly clumsy to his own ears.

A cheap little apartment building packed tightly between two others on either side, looking almost apologetic for being there. He circled around to the side and stood under the window of the corner apartment on the first floor. Both the window and its curtains were closed, but when he peered through the tiny slit between the curtains, he could see a tired middle-aged woman clearing off the dining table inside.

Oh, she's a little thinner now...And a little older, too...

His chest tightened, and not out of physical pain.

He placed his hand gently on the window frame. Except he'd underestimated his own strength; his "gentle" sent the thin glass panes rattling loudly.

The woman inside turned around and drew questioningly up to the window. His chest was on fire, again not out of physical pain. *What should I say first? I guess the first thing is "I'm home"? "I'm home"...* He practiced it a few times without opening his mouth, so that his tongue would obey him when it was time.

The woman parted the curtains a little further and peeked out at him through the glass. The bleary indoor light spilled out onto the asphalt,

softly illuminating the street around him. He sucked in a breath, momentarily forgetting the pain in his lungs. "I'm home, Mom..."

The windowpane reflected his face back at him, overlapped with his mother's, and that was when he remembered exactly what he looked like right now.

His mother's face on the other side of the glass twisted with fear right before his eyes. The moment she opened her mouth in the "o" shape of a scream, he bolted. A beat later, the scream followed him, echoing off the walls.

He ran for his life, desperate to get as far away as he could, ignoring the pain coursing throughout his body. His mother's long, thin scream rang in his ears like tinnitus, following him long after his footsteps had taken him out of there; he just kept on running for his life until he couldn't hear her anymore.



"Want me to carry that?"

"I'm fine," said Nana, shaking her head stubbornly. Kieli shrugged. But the truth was that she was already walking unsteadily herself, a little cowed by her own mountain of laundry. Nana staggered after her, both hands wrapped around a pile of linens that buried her up to the face.

It'd been a little warmer than usual today, so everything had dried by sunset, thank goodness. There was a huge amount of washing to take in; they were splitting it up into multiple trips between the clotheslines and the trailers. Five days into the Colonization Days festivities, it was a familiar job.

From what Kieli had heard, the lady who used to do the troupe's chores had gotten sick and quit or something, so now the members were doing their own cooking and cleaning in rotations. Still, though they couldn't very well shirk kitchen duty, the laundry seemed to always get left by the wayside. It didn't take long before she couldn't stand to see all the costumes and house clothes and linens piling up to the sky anymore; she just snapped and started washing, and after that it was a done deal. The whole job became Kieli's.

The trailer with the water tank in it had an industrial-size washing machine. They dried the clean things on ropes strung between the trailers.

Shiman's troupe wasn't really that big, but they somehow managed to produce such horrifying amounts of dirty laundry every day that you could spend most of your waking hours just taking care of it. But really, Kieli would've felt bad freeloading without giving anything in return, and she needed something to do to kill time anyway, so she was relieved to find herself useful.

Harvey still showed absolutely no inclination to take her with him into town, and when she asked him what progress he was making looking for Beatrix, he only gave vague answers. Because he'd reluctantly agreed to take the radio along with him on his trips lately, Kieli was left out in the cold. Sometimes the performers (especially Bearfoot in his bear costume) invited her to come have fun at the park, but she couldn't go jaunting around having fun just because Harvey wouldn't take her with him to search...

Geez, what's he hiding...?

She was starting to seriously plan on following him tomorrow, whatever she had to do. Promise or no promise, this just wasn't fair. (In fact, she should've noticed that a long time ago.)

"Are you mad, Kieli?" asked a clumsy voice somewhere below her shoulder. When she looked down, one of Nana's eyes was peeking up at her through a gap in her laundry. The rest of her face was more or less invisible.

"Mm? No, I'm not mad," she answered, trying to brush it off with a wry smile. Those clear, expressionless eyes gazed right at her as if they could see into her heart, and she felt an irrational pang of guilt. "...Um, it's not so much that I'm *mad*...maybe more like annoyed...." She knew she shouldn't be saying any of this to Nana, but a few of her thoughts escaped her anyway.

It was herself she was annoyed with. Probably the reason she couldn't get him to talk to her about anything was that he still thought of her as a little kid, just someone he was responsible for. She wanted to be more help to him, but he wouldn't let her do anything. She couldn't do anything.

Am I really that undependable...? Kieli sighed at herself, tossing the laundry into the trailer from the back door a little violently to vent her feelings.

"Ack!" cried someone from inside, jumping.

It was still a little early for the troupe to come home. She hadn't expected anyone to be back yet. Surprised, she squinted into the dim trailer

to find the person there turning back to look at her, then freezing in a half-standing position—with his hand stuck into one of the performers' bags. The area around him had been trashed.

...It's the thief. The real one, this time.

For a few seconds, it was just a frozen tableau of them staring at each other. Then one of them, Kieli couldn't have said who, let out a dumb little noise that broke the spell, and the thief instantly launched himself at her. While Kieli and Nana shrieked and fell on their rears on either side of the door, he flew out of the trailer and took off as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Wait here!" Kieli barked at Nana, springing immediately to her feet and chasing after him. She could hear a child's pattering footsteps behind her—obviously Nana hadn't listened. The thief had dived between the two trailers they'd hung the laundry between. When Kieli rounded the corner after him, the linens they hadn't brought in yet were still hanging down from overhead, blocking her way.

The thief had come to a stop before the wall of laundry, quailing before the fluttering ghostly army, but he started up running again in no time, darting beneath the sheets. Kieli had caught up by now, though. She grabbed him from behind and held on.

"Stop right there!"

"Wah!"

Kieli had too much momentum to stop, so she ended up tackling him more than catching him. They tripped, their arms and legs tangled up in each other, and plunged together into the white curtain of linen in front of them.

Something above her head gave a raspy, scraping noise—and no sooner had she heard Nana's voice shouting "Kieli, watch out!" than (as she realized later) the rope tore free from the trailer roofs under their combined weight, and the whole forest of laundry came crashing down on them.

"Kieli! Kieli, are you okay?"

Kieli groaned. At first she couldn't get her bearings with her vision blocked by laundry on all sides, but the muffled voice calling her name from the other side of the fabric reoriented her, and she pushed and wriggled her way through the clothes and blankets covering her. As soon as her head broke the surface, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Ouch..."

"Kieli!" She caught the girl diving into her arms and quickly scanned the area. *Where's the thief?*

A groan rose up from somewhere nearby. When Kieli looked closer, she saw that the thief (at least, she thought it was the thief; it looked more like a giant bug trying to break out of its cocoon) was writhing on the ground, twisted up in a giant sheet.



“Did we catch him?”

“...Yeah. Looks like we caught him.” She and Nana exchanged somewhat blank glances. Then they slapped their palms together and grinned.

When Kieli thought about it calmly, however, half the laundry getting wrecked again was nothing to be happy about. Sure, she’d caught the thief, but that among other things had her feeling kind of down about it all.

“Tell us your name—your name and your address.”

A ring of people had gathered in the clearing of the camp, surrounding the burglar tied up with sheets and clothesline. His head showed out of the top now, but the figure in the center of the circle still looked like something cocooned, and that something was, well, a little boy of not much more than ten. His being a kid didn’t change the fact that he was a thief, of course, but Kieli couldn’t help feeling kind of conflicted when she saw one kid getting glared at by a whole bunch of adults because she’d caught him.

At the heart of the group were Shiman and the other troupe leaders. One of them was solemnly asking the boy who he was, but the boy, who seemed oddly at home in this situation, only looked away and kept quiet. Apparently he was from the downtown slums. People told her that there wasn’t much law and order in that neighborhood, and child pickpockets and purse-snatchers were just a part of everyday life there.

Kieli held Nana’s hand and watched the interrogation from the back of the group.

“Good job, Kieli. Harry’ll be proud of you!” Nana said innocently.

Kieli gave her a wry smile. “I’m not too sure about that...” She had a feeling he was more likely to curse her for being rash, actually. She’d gone after the thief on the spur of the moment and made a grab for him, but if he’d been older or maybe even had a knife, she could’ve really gotten hurt.

The questioning was still going on, but the boy just kept his mouth shut. The troupe leaders exchanged glances, obviously at a loss.

“Well, not much more we can do. I guess we should turn him over to the Church Soldiers and —”

“N-No!” It had been an offhanded thought, but to everybody’s shock, the boy suddenly went from standoffish to pale. He crawled like an inchworm to the feet of the adults standing there. “Please, anything but the Church Soldiers!”

“Okay, then, tell us your name and address.”

He clammed right up again.

“Hey, somebody make the call!”

“No! Not the Church Soldiers, they’ll take my heart! They’ll experiment on me!”

As the boy pled wildly and the adults around him snickered, amused, it was Shiman who stepped in. “That’s enough, isn’t it? He didn’t do much damage. How about we toss him into storage for a night as punishment and then turn him loose?” He ran his eyes over the people around him, waiting for their response. The other troupe leaders nodded to each other with shrugs of *Sure, if that teaches him a lesson*. Shiman nodded, too. Then he turned to Kieli, who’d been watching from outside the circle. “That all right with you, Kieli?”

Kieli gaped for a moment, unable to grasp that he was actually asking her opinion, before unconsciously standing at attention and saying formally, “Y-Yes, sir. That’s all right.” Why was he asking *her*?

“Let go of me!” the boy shrieked, flailing. One of the performers tossed him over a shoulder. The crowd broke up and began drifting off. People called out casual greetings to Kieli as they passed, even people from other troupes. Mixed among the “Attagirl!” congratulations were a few “Sorrays”; it was then that she realized Shiman had deliberately consulted her to show his support in front of the ones who’d doubted her two days ago.

And so the thievery that had created a subtle air of suspicion in their ragtag camp came to some sort of conclusion. But...parents often said “Church Soldiers tear out the hearts of bad children” as a way to keep their kids in line, so she could see where *They’ll take my heart* had come from, but she didn’t think she’d ever heard *They’ll experiment on me* before.



“So sleepy...” He yawned widely. The circus buddy walking next to him gave him an exasperated look.

“You’re sure one hell of a sleeper. You go to bed first every night, and you sleep in latest every morning, *and* you do the weirdest sleepwalking ever.”

“Get off my case,” answered Bearfoot. He looked the other way,

wiping his running eyes. Maybe it looked to other people as though he did nothing but sleep, but his mind was usually awake. He couldn't help being sleepy. He did think maybe he'd stop doing the out-of-body thing for a while—he'd somehow managed to get away with the flimsy "weird sleepwalking" excuse two nights ago, but he was pretty sure they'd pack him off to the hospital if it happened again. And even if they didn't hospitalize him for *that*, he suspected a certain someone would give them another reason.

As soon as he'd hurriedly slipped back into his body in the trailer yesterday morning after getting caught peeping, that someone had stomped on his solar plexus (with shoes on!) and snarled *Next time you cause trouble, I'll make it so you don't have a body to come back to* in a voice that made him think he'd be kicked to death right then and there. It was scary.

"Rrrggh," yawned his companion. Maybe it was contagious. He ended the yawn with a light stretch and muttered, "God, what a pain. The criminal's already been caught, so why should we have to keep doing patrols?"

"You said it, man." Yawn.

Yawn.

They set each other off on fits of listless yawns, griping softly as they walked side by side around the sleeping camp.

Ever since the first uproar about the burglary two days ago everybody in the camp had wanted more crime prevention measures, so now each troupe took turns patrolling in the afternoon and at night. "Crime prevention" was all well and good, but to the poor suckers at the bottom of the totem pole who actually got stuck doing it, it was nothing but a pain. You could make a cursory inspection of the whole place in thirty minutes, but he and the performer who wore the mouse costume had been told "You take your time, and don't come back here for the next two hours." So, left with no choice, they were just starting their second circuit.

"And? How are things going with Kieli?" said Rat. Bearfoot had no idea what that "and" was supposed to connect with, considering that the topic had come completely out of left field. Rat was a good guy, but he liked to tease people.

"What do you mean, 'things'?"

"You're after her, aren't you? She's no knockout, but she's a normal sort of cute, I'll give you that. Me, I tend to like 'em a little curvier, but to

each his own.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know all about what you like.” Bearfoot shot a narrow-eyed glance at his leering companion. Then he sighed. “Things aren’t really going anywhere.”...*Because the guy with her scares the crap out of me.*

That whole topic was going nowhere fast, really. The conversation dropped off, and they both fell silent. The only sounds in the quiet clearing were their crunching footsteps. They echoed eerily loudly.

“In that case, let’s tell scary stories,” proposed Rat, who could apparently go from zero to unbearably bored in the blink of an eye. Once again, the topic came totally out of nowhere. *What “case”?*

“This is just something I heard, okay? But there’s an old geezer from one of the other troupes who says he’s seen him with the Chief before. You know, the redhead.”

“...Okay...but so what? They know each other.”

“Yeah, but the thing is, this was supposedly like twenty years ago.”

“Okay...” He’d steeled himself when Rat said “scary story” (ghost stories were no joke to him), but what was so ghostly about that? Then, after a moment, he got it—and a chill went down his spine. *Twenty years ago?*

With a stricken face, he turned to his patrolmate. Rat theatrically lit his face from below with his flashlight and pitched his voice down about three notches. “Not just twenty years ago, either. Thirty years ago, forty years ago...and every time he shows up, someone in the troupe dies. Last time, they found a man’s corpse inside a bear costume, covered in blood!”

“A-A bear...?” He gulped nervously, leaning closer.

The corner of Rat’s mouth twisted up in a grin. “Gotcha!”

His shoulders slumped with relief. “What the hell, man?”

“Well, I really did hear the thing about twenty years ago. But it was from this old windbag who narrated silent movies. And even if he was telling the truth, it must’ve been the guy’s dad or something, right?”

“Dammit, I’ll get you back for that,” said Bearfoot, glaring bitterly at his snickering companion and silently vowing to visit him in spirit form later and give him the fright of his life. Something didn’t sit right, though.

He’d been taken aback when he realized that the redheaded man could see him in spirit form, and not just Kieli. And he could’ve sworn he’d heard another voice, too. What was *with* that group...?

Rustle...

Hearing a sudden noise while he was still deep in his thoughts startled a little falsetto shriek out of him. He slapped his own hand over his mouth to shut himself up. Without taking away the hand, he exchanged questioning glances with Rat. Then, as one, they turned toward where the sound had come from.

At night the walls of the parked trailers blended inconspicuously into the blue-gray of the sky. The noise was still there, coming from behind one of them, and as they listened a *rattle, rattle* of metal joined it.

The two of them crept toward it together as quietly as they could. When they peeked out from the cover of another trailer's shadow, they saw a giant human shape crouched at its back door and sort of squirming there. *He must be trying to break it open.* Rat gave him a significant look and then shrugged elaborately. Presumably he was trying to say something along the lines of, "Wow, we just get one thief after another here."

Next, Rat ordered him with jerking eyes and hand signals to circle around to the other side of the trailer, which started a whole rapid-fire conversation of moving eyes and lips:

Huh? We're going to capture him ourselves?

Obviously! If two little girls could do it, two men had better be able to do it. Don't you want to impress Kieli?

Well, yeah...

By which point the door was wrenched open with a loud creak.

"Oh!" they both exclaimed without thinking, and the intruder turned around in the doorway.

There was definitely no question of circling around now. They just both leapt out of the shadow at once, and his companion beamed the light at the trailer ahead. In the center of its white halo they saw the thief's face—



He was just sitting down on the wall of blocks and beginning to light a cigarette when he heard brisk footsteps behind him. When he turned to look, a small figure was running out of the shadowy camp toward him. It stopped just inside the circle cast by the light overhead, the frozen puffs of its breath coming just a little too fast, and then walked the rest of the way to him.

"You came again..."

“Oh, I just happened to wake up and I saw you coming out here.”

Harvey got the feeling she'd actually stayed up watching for him. But maybe she wasn't in as much of a hurry today, because she was wearing a coat this time, which was a relief for several reasons.

“When did you get home?”

“Little while ago. I just had a talk with Shiman in his trailer.” As he answered, he grabbed her arm and pulled her up before she could ask permission to sit next to him. When he took the radio from around his neck and gave it back to her, she sat with her shoulder almost-but-not-quite touching his and put the radio on her lap.

“We just heard about your adventure. Sounds like you were a star.”

“Well, something like that.”

“That’s all well and good, but try not to do stuff that’s too dangerous.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

Harvey lit his cigarette for real this time, only half-listening to the conversation next to him. Come to think of it, hadn't he said something like that to the radio a few days ago, too? *I can see why the Corporal always has something to worry about*, he thought in a somebody-else's-problem sort of way as he dropped the lighter back into his pocket. Around that point he noticed that Kieli was watching him out of the corner of her eye. It seemed as though she was expecting him to say something, so after a moment's thought, he patted her lightly on the head and said, “Attagirl.” That was it. The radio had already covered what he wanted to say, so he didn't really have anything to add. Kieli seemed relieved. She dropped her gaze back to her lap, looking a tiny bit more cheerful...*Don't look so weirdly happy at such a little thing.*

For some reason he didn't know quite where to look suddenly, so he turned up his face and blew a cloud of smoke at the sky partly just to cover his confusion. He figured he wasn't flustered enough to fall off the wall today, anyway. That last time had just been one of those things. Yeah. He'd still been thinking of her as a kid, but then all of a sudden she was unexpectedly, yeah, one of those things, so he'd panicked a little, or something. What the hell did he even mean by “one of those things”?

Dammit, this is all their fault... All these people around saying all that stuff had put dangerous ideas into his head. Harvey made an annoyed sound around his cigarette and glared sideways at the primary person “around”: the radio. “*What are you looking at?*” asked a frosty voice from the speaker.

“Shut up. This is your fault.” He sure as hell didn’t need the radio asking *what* was supposed to be its fault, though, so he was in the process of looking away and obviously dropping the subject when the screams rang out through the dead quiet of the camp. They kind of sounded like the death throes of some giant bird, but they were male voices. Two of them, Harvey estimated.

He’d already swung himself down from the wall on sheer reflex by the time he’d even processed the sound. A clamor immediately sprang up in the camp. He could hear people pouring out of their trailers.

As he poised himself to run in the direction of the screaming, something came shooting through the clearing toward him from that very direction. A massive figure carrying something tossed over his shoulder—he kept turning his head, looking behind him, looking behind him, yet he was still charging forward at unbelievable speed—

“Gah!” Harvey dodged fast enough to prevent a head-on collision, but he couldn’t get completely clear; the blow caught him in the shoulder and sent him flying. He immediately dropped into a roll and let it take him a half-turn on the ground before springing back up onto one knee. Harvey’s opponent, on the other hand, had apparently fallen completely wrong and landed splayed out awkwardly on the ground. But he was up again in no time, hurriedly pulling his hood down over his eyes and resettling his cargo over his shoulder.

Harvey caught a split-second glimpse of the face underneath the hood. Green skin like a rotting corpse, bulging lidless eyeballs—

“I-It’s a monster! A monster kidnapped the thief!”

“Over there!”

The strange figure’s shoulders twitched at the shouts and running footsteps coming from inside the camp, and it took off again like a gunshot. “Wait—” Harvey started to say, turning to go after it. Then all the blood drained from his face. There, standing directly its path, was—“Kieli! Dodge!” he shouted.

She was standing rooted to the spot in front of the block wall, with the radio clutched to her chest. At the sound of his voice she ducked, probably automatically. The next moment, the fleeing figure kicked up off the ground and launched into the air, clearing Kieli’s head and the wall in one leap and disappearing over the other side.

Kieli lifted her head and gave him a look of total incomprehension. “Har—”

“Stay here! Don’t you dare come after me, you got that?!” he snapped, and shot past her to vault over the wall without waiting for a response. By the time the radio started up with its “*Moron! Don’t go alone, Herbie!*” he’d already landed on the other side. The mysterious figure was already a spot in the distance, making its way toward town.

It’s fast, Harvey thought, clicking his tongue as he ran. Not only was it carrying a huge load, but it was running in the most haphazard way, dragging its rear foot and throwing its front onto the ground with a slap, and yet somehow it was freakishly fast.

The “load” it was carrying turned out to be a human child. He’d heard someone shouting crazy stuff like “The monster kidnapped the thief,” and Shiman had said the burglar they’d caught was locked up in a trailer, so he guessed this boy must be the thief. Why *it* would take the trouble to go after that kid Harvey had no idea, but anyway his first priority should probably be making sure the brat was safe.

Still, to think what he’d searched four days for with no luck would actually come to him...

As he ran, Harvey felt for the folding knife in his back pocket with his left hand to make sure it was there. That was all: he didn’t take it out yet. He’d been carrying it because of what he assumed would happen when he did make contact, yet even now something inside him refused to give up, stubbornly hoping that he wouldn’t *really* need it.

By around the time his breath finally started to race, they were in the slums of downtown. The figure in front of him showed no signs of tiring. It ran on and on through the darkened streets’ sporadic circles of light and finally kicked aside a pile of trash to dive into a narrow alleyway.

Harvey followed right on its heels, but when he rounded the corner, there was nobody there. Footsteps clanged noisily up the zigzagging stairs on the right-hand wall.

He was starting to think that something about this wasn’t right. He ignored it for the moment, though, and took the stairs up after his quarry two at a time. About three or four floors up, he jumped into the building through an emergency exit. A dimly lit hallway lined with doors stretched out to one side of him. It must be a hotel or apartment building or something, but he guessed it wasn’t being used now; there were no signs of life, and a dusty, musty smell had settled over everything. He saw a retreating back shoot straight past all the doors to the emergency exit on the opposite wall.

The vague feeling gelled into certainty. *Something's not right.* Harvey's opponent was amateurish, but it was obviously trying to give Harvey the slip. Were those things capable of that type of high-level thought...?

The instant he got out of the hallway and through the second emergency exit, he sensed malice directed at him from somewhere overhead. When he reflexively leapt to one side, *it* dropped down from underneath the stairs of the floor above, where it'd been waiting in ambush. It was unencumbered now. Maybe it'd laid the boy down on top of the staircase. A wild punch sliced through the air and slammed into the handrail with a harsh *clang*, leaving the metal warped and twisted.

Ugh, this is not funny! Harvey thought with a shudder, backstepping away from the barrage of attacks that followed. When his back touched the railing, he slid down to the floor on his back and shouted, half to encourage himself and half as a curse: "Fall!" His assailant was already running toward him with too much momentum to stop. Harvey jabbed a knee into its stomach and sent it flying. Then, still lying down, he immediately twisted his upper body around to peer over the side of the staircase.

The giant who'd sailed over the railing into space with a dull bleat of surprise was now being embraced by the ground below. Harvey doubted a mere three-floor fall would be enough to disable it, though. Should he go after it? No, first he needed to make sure the boy was safe...

He waffled between going up and going down, but the instant he caught sight of the girl running into the street below him, the decision was made for him.

"Hey! I told you not to come!"

Kieli screeched to a halt when she saw a huge object suddenly fall into the garbage pile in front of her. She stood there cowering, rooted to the spot. *It* promptly sat up among the trash, looking completely unharmed, and went after her. Harvey made a profane noise and coiled himself to spring down the stairs, but at that point he was tackled from behind by a completely unexpected enemy.

"You jerk!" cried the boy he'd thought was a victim, clinging to him like a monkey. Harvey missed a step and lost his balance. They tumbled down the stairs more or less in each other's arms. He just barely managed to make his fall break right, but he slammed his back against the rail of the landing hard enough to knock all the breath out of him.

It was no time to be passing out from the pain. After a gasping second, he blocked out his nerves' messages and tried to sit up, but the boy still glued to his torso got in his way. "What's with you?! Move it!" When Harvey got pissed, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and tried to peel him off, the kid started pounding on him with tiny fists.

"Bastard! Bastard! What're you trying to do to my big brother?!"

"Whatever!" Harvey didn't even care anymore. He was just about to throw the brat off by force when he processed what he'd heard and let out a dumb, "Huh?"

"L-Let go of my brother!" cried a thick voice from below at the same time. He turned his eye toward the source of the sound, hand full of struggling child, and saw the hooded figure facing him with an arm around Kieli's throat to keep him in check.

So now they both had hostages. They glared at each other, with the air frozen still between them, until Harvey echoed in an awkward, blank voice, "'Brother'?"



The door creaked open a tiny crack, and then the boy slipped inside and closed it again right away behind him. Kieli was starting to feel fidgety, as though she didn't quite know what to do with herself, so she was a little relieved to see him.

"Things in town are fine. There wasn't any stir," he reported briskly, moving across the room to switch places with Harvey, who was standing by the window. The window was so far up the wall it was practically at the ceiling, and the boy was too short to see out of it; somebody had built a tall pile of hemp sandbags and things underneath it as a lookout perch. He climbed easily up it and stood on his knees as he checked the street outside.

When they'd all spoken at that building earlier, the brothers had said they lived right nearby, so they'd changed locations. Now they were in a semibasement apartment that wasn't much better than a storeroom. A bare bulb on the ceiling cast murky, yellowish light on its dusty corners. The hemp bags piled under the window had plenty of company: big boxes, little boxes, broken furniture, and all kinds of other debris littered the floor. Kieli sat on the edge of a long box up against the wall that was

apparently being used as a bed.

“Want a drink?”

Surprised, Kieli shrank away unthinkingly from the mug that was suddenly thrust at her. The radio hanging from her neck leaked menacing static, and a charged atmosphere swelled all around them.

“Kieli,” Harvey said. “...Corporal, cut it out.”

Chided by Harvey’s quiet voice, all the radio’s menace evaporated immediately. Kieli quickly felt sorry for her obvious rejection. She reached out for the tin mug. But when she took it from him, their fingers brushed, and she gave another tiny flinch. His skin puckered as if it had been melted and then dried out again. His fingers were gnarled, misshapen. On some of them, the nails were just missing, as if they’d peeled off...Kieli went stiff, staring at those hands. Then, with a start, she tore her eyes away and gazed at her own hands instead.

A hand came down over her hair. When she lifted her face, Harvey was there. He sat down beside her, ruffling her hair lightly. “Sorry, Chris.”

“It’s fine. Please, don’t worry.” The man who’d introduced himself as Chris—Christoph—twitched cheeks as puckered as his fingers into an unpracticed smile. He spoke a bit slowly, as if he had to concentrate hard to make the sounds come out right. “It’ll warm you up a little,” he said to Kieli. “It’s cold, in here.” Then he deliberately retreated to a box a bit of a distance from hers to sit down.

Harvey had sat next to her to reassure her, and feeling his body heat close by was a huge relief, but at the same time she was flooded with guilt. She dropped her eyes dejectedly to the mug in her hands. It was filled to the brim with thin, lukewarm coffee. It reminded her of the man who’d brewed it and the way he spoke: eager but awkward.

Other than the camp stove they boiled water on, there was nothing in the apartment to give off heat. Nor any proper bed, either; just this long box with a blanket pushed out of the way to one side. This was what passed for his home—in other words, his hideout.

“Sorry, for causing a fuss. I was afraid my brother, would get turned over to the Church, so I was in a rush, to help him...” The sentence wasn’t very long, but it took his clumsy tongue longer than most people to get it out.

The boy keeping watch at the window turned around and pouted. “You don’t have to apologize to them, Brother,” he argued with lively, quick words that made him sound like the exact opposite of his brother.

“It’s your fault, Toby. I’ve told you, over and over, to quit stealing. Mom would be so sad.”

“Who the hell cares? Mom treated you like —”

“Toby,” said Chris, slow but harsh. The boy scowled sulkily and looked back out the window. Christoph sighed and turned back to them. He didn’t seem capable of very complicated facial expressions, but Kieli thought his pained smile probably meant he was uncomfortable. “He’s not a bad kid...He saw me, and recognized me, and hid me here. We lived on the, first floor of this building, so we used this place as our ‘base.’ We used to play here, together all the time, before I left to go find work.”

Kieli felt as though she could almost see the images of the past that were playing out in Christoph’s mind. Two close brothers who ran around hiding behind boxes as they played “war.” From his ravaged face and body it was hard to imagine what he’d looked like before, but she thought he must’ve been a nice, even-tempered young man.

His story went like this: about two years ago, the capital had sent out a call for workers to come develop the mountain, and Chris had left home to join them. However, not long after the job began there was a huge cave-in, and in the days afterward the news was filled with lists “missing” and “unidentified” persons. When the authorities eventually released a list of the bodies they’d managed to put names to, Christoph’s name was on it. The government said there were too many casualties to deal with each individually; Toby and his mother only received a letter saying that no remains would be delivered to the families and that all victims would be buried in one mass grave in the capital.

“...And the next thing I knew, I was in the pit with the monsters. Though now I guess I, didn’t look any different from them...Most of them either sat still, and never moved, or else just wandered around, and never sat down. Sometimes, they’d start eating each other, but then they’d get tired of it. Once a day, a hole in the ceiling would open up, and somebody would toss down the new guys. That was just about the only thing, that ever really *happened*. Everybody’d swarm around the new guys, and tear them to pieces, but they’d be fine again the next day, and they’d help gang up on the next set of new guys...”

He spoke each word slowly and clearly, so his listeners had plenty of time to take in each new revelation and let their imaginations run wild, which meant the scene sprang to vivid life in Kieli’s mind. She felt something sour rising in the back of her throat. She sipped her thin coffee

to wash down the bile.

“Do you want to wait outside, Kieli?” Harvey whispered. He was still sitting next to her with his legs crossed. When she lifted her gaze a little to peek at him out of the corner of her eye, from her vantage point the left side of his face seemed as expressionless as ever, his eye a bit downcast. He chomped meaninglessly on an unlit cigarette and looked vaguely in the direction of his knees. His left hand was in his coat pocket—probably fiddling with his lighter.

Kieli could tell that what Harvey really meant by *Do you want to wait outside* was *I want you to wait outside*, but she shook her head firmly. “I’ll stay.”

She wanted to know anything and everything that might be connected to what Harvey’d seen in the capital.

Kieli had realized right away that Christoph was the same species as the monsters from the waterways underneath Gate Town (though she wasn’t sure whether “species” was the right word to use). Christoph was dried-out while they’d been aquatic, and the biggest difference of all was that he was wearing real (if obviously secondhand) clothes, but they all shared that greenish skin and giant, warped shape like their cells had bloated and swollen.

Now that she’d run into that same species a second time, Kieli couldn’t very well *not* press for answers. Maybe even Harvey agreed that there was no point in trying to hide this from her anymore; at long last, he’d told her in his own words about the things he’d stubbornly refused to discuss before: those monsters, and what had gone on in the capital.

She’d only just heard it all in the ten minutes since they’d come here, so she hadn’t digested everything yet, but—what had been happening at that research facility Harvey’d invaded last winter—they’d been manufacturing replicas of Undying “cores,” and the Church was in on it, and some of the corpses the Church was supposed to bury were delivered there, and with unstable replica cores shoved into them, their cell regeneration functions had gone haywire, so basically people were mass-producing defective Undyings—

So many bare facts had been stuffed into Kieli’s head all at once, and in such an offhand voice, that it honestly didn’t feel real. However, now that she’d heard this much of Christoph’s story, she was starting to internalize the reality little by little.

She couldn’t deny that she was scared to hear more. But all the same,

the desire to know was stronger. Christoph had broken off and waited for her, so after a moment she said, "I'm sorry. Please keep going." Her voice was a bit scratchy. Christoph nodded and slowly began talking again.

"...was so scared, I just cowered in a corner, the whole time. For days and days and days...that's how I lived in that stinking pit, and I figured I would die there. But none of us ever, starved to death. Not me, not the other guys. Days passed, weeks passed...I figured I'd live on forever there." He paused. "But then, one day, someone opened the barred door, in the wall of the shaft from the outside. It was this place called 'Section 6' or something."

Something in Harvey's hand made a small clicking noise, and he stood up so suddenly the bed-box squeaked. Kieli kind of suspected he'd accidentally flicked the lighter inside his pocket and had to put it out with his fist. He immediately smoothed all expression from his face and said, "Never mind, it's nothing." Maybe something had struck him, though.

Instead of sitting down, he lit the cigarette that had been hanging out of the corner of his mouth, apparently deciding that as long as he was up he might as well make the most of it. He offered an abbreviated version of Kieli's apology from before ("Sorry. Keep going."), and Christoph answered with the same nod. This time he took a little breath before continuing, as if all the talking was wearing him out.

"We all stampeded out of the open door. I think we were going on instinct, trying to get into the light...Some guys with guns came after us, pretty quick. I'd bet most of us were killed, or caught. But in all the confusion, I managed to get away clean. It took months, but, I made my way home...and when I saw my mom, I was so happy, I tried to show my face to her..." His voice petered out.

There was a short silence, and then he abruptly changed the subject. "Look." He stooped over and rolled up one pant leg. Half of his shin was gouged out, the area around it charred black—it was a wound from a carbonization gun. "I got shot, on the run. Everything else healed right away, but not this. My leg hurts...it hurts so bad at night, I can't sleep. I want to sleep, but I can't, and I can't take it..."

Kieli could hear Harvey sighing as he blew out a thin stream of smoke.

She'd been told that even for an Undying, it took a long time to regenerate tissue when you were shot with a carbonization gun. There was Harvey's missing right arm, for example—and Christoph hadn't been trained to block out pain, so he had to keep on suffering while the

unhealed wound kept hurting...

"Hey, there's a way to fix my big brother, right?" piped up the boy at the window, breaking his silence for the first time. Maybe he'd been itching to join in all along. With all eyes turned to him, he slid down from his pile of bags, sending up a small cloud of dust. "You know lots of stuff, right? Make him better. Turn him back to how he looked before, so he can go see Mom. That way the three of us can live together again like we used to."

"Toby, it's not fair to ask him that..." said his brother from behind him. But Toby refused to be quieted. He walked right up to Harvey and looked imploringly up at his tall form.

"Mom won't say anything to me, but she's cried every single night since they told her he died. I know, 'cause I stay up and listen even after she kisses me good night. Make him better, okay? Please."

"...Sorry, but there's nothing I can do." Harvey's voice and the coppery left eye looking down at Toby were cold as ice, and Toby and Christoph were both struck momentarily speechless. "It's not an issue of making him better. He's dead. He's been dead for a long time. His corpse is just moving. You can't make a corpse better."

Who was he talking to? It was almost as if the words weren't meant for Toby or Christoph.

The boy finally let go of the breath he'd been holding. It came out in an agonized "Why...?!" He flew at Harvey, wailing. "What's that supposed to mean?!"

Harvey faltered back a half-step, but that was all; he didn't try to avoid Toby or peel him off. His left hand and the right hand he didn't have both stayed in his pockets. He stared down at the boy shaking him violently by the coat without seeming to feel anything.

"Why?! My big brother didn't do anything wrong! Why did they make him into a monster like this?! Put him back the way he was! Put him back, put him back, put him back!"

Nobody else moved. Harvey just stood still and silently let Toby do what he wanted; Kieli, Christoph, and the radio couldn't quite figure out how to interrupt. They didn't seem able to do anything but watch and see what happened.

A while later, after the boy's wails somehow turned to sobs, he started clutching Harvey's coat and crying. Christoph finally shook himself out of his paralysis. He walked stiffly over to them and pulled his younger

brother off from behind. Meanwhile, Kieli...

Kieli was angry. Maybe Christoph hadn't done anything wrong, but Harvey sure hadn't, either! He didn't deserve this abuse one bit.

Bitter at Harvey for taking it all on himself and not saying anything back, and bitter at herself for not being able to say anything, she squeezed the mug of stone-cold coffee tightly in her hands.



As they walked back out into the street from the back door of the apartment building, Harvey started patting his coat pockets. "Forgot my smokes," he muttered to himself.

He started to turn back, but Toby headed him off by saying "I'll go get them!" The boy had been bringing up the rear of their little procession, still puffy-eyed from crying; now he immediately changed course and jogged back down the narrow steps to the semibasement storage room. Harvey, Christoph, and Kieli were temporarily left alone by the back door. Kieli stood silently looking down at the light bleeding out of the downstairs door until a finger poked the crown of her head and an exasperated voice whispered, "What are you so mad about?" She shook her head with a scowl.

Christoph hung back in the shadow of the doorway with his hood pulled low over his head, whispering uneasily, "What about the troupe...?"

Harvey waved him off carelessly. "Eh, I'll make up something." Who knew what unbelievable story he was going to fob everyone off with this time.

Christoph pulled the skin of his cheeks up to form a smile. "Thank you for everything...You're a good man." Then his words grew more hesitant and indistinct. He gave Harvey a look with a little fear—and probably a little envy mixed in, too. "You're, a real Undying, aren't you...?"

After stiffening for a moment, Harvey gave a little laugh as if he didn't know how to respond. *A real Undying...* Now that Kieli thought about it, the words did sound kind of funny. Maybe hearing Christoph say them with such a straight face tickled him. Either way, she suspected it was an ironic laugh, directed at least partially toward himself.

Before long, they heard light footsteps running up the staircase. "Are these the cigarettes?" asked Toby, a little winded. He held out a box.

Harvey accepted it casually. “Thanks.” Toby glanced shyly up at him, seeming to check his expression. When Harvey blinked in confusion, he looked away uncomfortably.

“Um, sorry...”

Instead of answering, Harvey roughly rumbled the boy’s hair with his left hand. That was all, but maybe it got the point across, because afterward he looked ready to cry again (for another reason this time, Kieli thought). By then, of course, Harvey had already let go and turned to her. “Time to get going.”

Just then, a woman’s voice tore through the air, charging the relatively friendly scene all at once with tension. “Toby!” Almost as one, all four of them turned in the direction of the voice. Through the open doorway, they could see someone standing halfway down the hallway that connected the apartment building’s front and back doors. It was a middle-aged woman wearing a cheap-looking synthetic shawl.

“Mom...”

“What have you been doing out so late? I was so worried...!” As she spoke, she looked with blatant suspicion from Toby to the others with him, who so obviously didn’t live here. The instant her eyes settled on one particular face, she let out a short shriek.

For a split-second Christoph’s whole body went stiff, and then he flung himself out of the entryway into the night. Since Kieli was standing just in front of the door, he bowled her right over, and only Harvey pulling her into a rough hug saved her from hitting the ground. “Brother!” Toby yelled after him. Christoph was going so fast he couldn’t slow himself down in time, and he crashed into the wall on the other side of the street. He didn’t step back or even slow down. He just spun ninety degrees.

“W-Wait!” cried the woman. Christoph was already tearing off again, body hunched like a wounded beast’s, but hearing her seemed to paralyze him. All of them were frozen in midmovement for several blank seconds.

The first person to speak was the woman in the shawl. “Chris...? That’s you, isn’t it, Christoph...?”

Christoph’s shoulders jerked in alarm. Still only half-standing, he reluctantly turned his head to look at her. Could she see her son in the profile of this man’s face, glimpsed underneath the hood? Her tearful eyes widened.

“But...they told me you died, in an accident...So then why...?”

“I did die, Mom. But, I came back.”

When she heard her son's stilted, clumsy way of talking, she gasped and staggered unsteadily back. Pressing clasped fists to her forehead, she bowed prayerfully and pleaded, "Look how sinful a creature he's become...forgive him, O God, forgive him..." Over and over she mumbled it, like some sort of spell: *Forgive him, forgive him, forgive him.* Christoph just stood there, shoulders slumped. Toby clenched the hem of his mother's shawl from behind, biting his lip wretchedly.

Just what about Christoph's body is such a sin against God? It was the Church who made him this way in the first place! Kieli absolutely refused to accept this. Still clutching Harvey's arm tightly, she watched the whole mother-son scene with a glare.

"Would you...let me get a better look at you...?"

"But, it's my face, that makes you..."

"Let me see you." Her appeal was firm, even if her voice was weak. Christoph walked timidly up to her. His mother reached out with both trembling hands and placed her fingertips on the tight skin of his cheeks, then snatched them back in horror at the feel of it. Christoph hunched his shoulders apologetically.

She hesitated a little, but then she laid her palms on her son's cheeks, steadily this time. She stared up at his corpse-like features. "Those eyes... you really *are* Chris, then."

"Yeah..."

"You came to see me at first, didn't you...? I was just so startled..."

"It's okay...I'm sorry I, scared you."

The woman watched her son do his very best to answer her, stumbling and clumsy-tongued as he was, and bit her lip as if to hold back some powerful emotion. She murmured *please forgive him* one more time. But then...

"...Welcome home..." she said, bringing his head toward her and pressing his face into her shoulder, murmuring a different set of words over and over and over like a spell:

Thank you, God. Thank you for returning my son to me. Thank you, thank you...





The rest of the late-night alleyway looked as bleak and deserted as anyone might expect, but the windows of one corner apartment on that building's first floor were bathed in a dull yet gentle light and a faint warmth.

"Okay, so it seems like the whole thing worked out even without us being able to do anything...but do you think that family will really be able to keep living together?"

"Beats me. It's not my problem, and I can't do anything anyway," answered Harvey curtly. He turned his back on those windows and started off down the alley, motioning Kieli along. *"Us being able to do anything," eh? So did you want to do something?* Kieli came after him, but she still looked miffed about something, and she was glaring at the asphalt under her feet. He gave her a tired sidelong glance. "And? What are you so mad about?"

"Lots of stuff."

...Lots of stuff, huh? Harvey gave a short sigh. "Sorry I didn't tell you about the stuff in the capital. I meant to do it sooner or later."

Still looking down, Kieli shook her head, and then asked softly, "Is that everything?"

He didn't have a ready answer for that. For a few seconds he couldn't find anything to say. Eventually he echoed "That's everything" in a voice that sounded stilted even to him.

"...That's okay, then." Kieli's voice lightened a bit in her relief, which only made his own words cut him deeper.

He walked in silence for a while, keenly uncomfortable. Downtown at this time of night was ruled by silence and a subtle tension. It wasn't a sleepy silence so much as an "I'm holding my breath to keep my prey from hearing me coming" sort of a silence. Every so often there was a dry crinkle as he stepped on a piece of trash on the roadside.

When he pulled out a cigarette and lit it, the awkward atmosphere eased some. He tilted his head back as he exhaled so his eye could follow the trail of smoke into the night sky and wondered with a certain bizarre admiration why the smoking habit was so convenient for liars. It struck him that whoever had invented the very first cigarette long ago must have

been a con man.



Boring, boring, boring...

He'd kept an eye on them for a while just out of curiosity, looking forward to seeing when it would eat its little brother and attack its mother, but things had resolved themselves surprisingly peacefully.

Well, no matter. It wasn't as though the possibility had been completely ruled out. There was no guarantee mental corrosion wouldn't turn it into a real monster someday. He smiled a little as he pictured what the despair on its face would look like when it realized it had killed its family. *No, wait, I guess at that point it wouldn't have the brain function left to feel despair. Heh, whoops.*

"Heh," *my ass. Did I really just think that?* He had to admit he was in a creepily good mood today. Any other day he might've been pissed off enough at having his fun spoiled to go over there and kill it himself, but today he was pretty much past caring about the little stuff. He wasn't even particularly angry.

He'd found something much more interesting than observing failed monsters.

Watching the redheaded man and that slip of a girl disappear into the blue-gray gloom from his spot in the shadows of the alleyway, he found himself breathing a low "Wow."

Truth be told, he was pretty shocked that the man hadn't gotten sick of dragging that girl everywhere with him by now. She'd grown since he'd last seen her, too. *So, even a little runt like that eventually gets some curves, eh? Makes me almost wish I'd done things differently.*

The sardonic grin had stuck in place on his right cheek. He rubbed it with the back of his hand, and a piece of necrotized skin peeled off and stuck. *Damn it, again?* He looked down in irritation and saw that the skin of the hand itself was bubbling up in throbbing blisters. The coal-tar-like liquid that was his lifeblood seeped out, clinging around the wound, regenerating and perfecting the necrotized cells from the outside in. As fast as the cells recovered, they bubbled up and necrotized, and then recovered again: life and death in an endless, pointless game of tag that looked like maggots sloshing around the surface of a mud puddle. The overflowing

clumps of cells splattered wetly down at his feet, making odd black stains on the asphalt.

...Well, he supposed he was a failed monster, too. Hmph.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance and ground his own cells into the asphalt with his foot, then leaned against the wall of the building and changed the direction his body was facing. He left his shoulder there to rub along the wall as he began dragging his body down the deserted alley toward the place of deepest darkness.

INTERLUDE: IN A WINDY CLOISTER ONE
DAY

In truth, Julius didn't have many memories of his grandfather. He'd been a prominent member of the Church's highest organ, the Council of Elders, so Julius had never been able to interact with him on the casual level normal families could with a "grandpa." And by the time Julius was old enough to really make memories, his grandfather had been pretty senile anyway (though he'd still held his key post in the Church), so he could only remember a few times that they'd met while his grandfather was in his right mind.

It wasn't long after Julius had returned to the capital from Gate Town that he'd been told of the death. Everyone had known Grandfather didn't have a lot time left, so there wasn't much confusion, and the whole capital turned out to give him a grand memorial.

Julius himself didn't have much work to do, but what with one thing and another, his life was still hectic for days. The afternoon the main business surrounding the funeral was wrapped up, he finally got the chance to speak with his father, if not for long and not sitting down. Even without all this extra commotion, his father was usually so busy with his Security Forces work that Julius got to see him only once or twice a month.

"Are you joining the Council of Elders, Dad?"

"Hard to say. There are several other candidates. I imagine there will be deliberations," said his father. Julius was secretly relieved that he didn't sound particularly attached to the idea of elder status. A promotion was something to be happy about, of course, but he was upset about having so few chances to see his father *now*; if he got even busier than this, they'd be worse than strangers. "More importantly, I wish they'd hurry up and finish renovating this place."

"Yeah, it's cold here."

He loved his father for dismissing the whole thing with that "more importantly."

They were having their conversation in one of the cloisters connecting the church towers. Renovations on it had been abandoned, with total disregard for functionality, just far enough into the process to leave the walkway an open colonnade with no roof, so the mountain winds blew straight down onto them. Julius turned up the collar of his clerical robes to block out the wind as they hurried through it together.

He didn't like the cold, but in truth he didn't want to get to the next tower too quickly, either. The moment they reached it, their time for

talking would be over, and his father would leave to start in on all the work that had built up.

His father unexpectedly slowed his pace a little, almost as if he knew what Julius was thinking, though Julius highly doubted that. Eyes casually facing forward, he said, “It looks like you got taller again, eh?”

Whenever they saw each other after a long break, the topic of his height always came up, maybe because his father couldn’t think of anything else to say. “A little.”

“You can quit growing now. I don’t want you overtaking me!”

“That’s just selfish,” he said, glaring and puffing his cheeks in displeasure. His father let his gaze wander, feigning innocence. Come to think of it, though, it did seem as though they were a lot closer to eye level than they’d been before. He probably *would* be taller than his medium-height dad before long, but personally, he needed to be a lot taller than that. His target height was above average. *I swear I’ll get bigger than that guy...*

He raised his head a little and glared experimentally at his target: the point where a certain copper-colored eye would be on a level with his own.

After returning from Gate Town, he’d tried to look into the fossil energy research facility, but he didn’t have much to show for it. All he’d managed to find out was that it was under the direct supervision of the Council of Elders and was highly classified. Even as senile as his grandfather had been, it seemed like a good bet that he’d had inside knowledge—Julius had just been plotting whether he could make up some reason to go visit when word of his death had arrived and that plan became forever impossible.

What about Dad? Does he know something...?

“Hey, Dad. There’s a big lab on that rock ledge up in the mountains, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, that. Yeah, there is.”

Obviously Julius hadn’t brought it up naturally enough, because his father blinked as though he was taken aback by the sudden change of subject. He racked his brain for an excuse. “Some of my friends in school have been talking about it. I was wondering whether we could use it as a report topic. Do you think I could get permission to go visit?”

“Well, it’s outside my jurisdiction,” answered his father unpromisingly.

“Oh.” He’d more or less seen that coming, really. He’d only asked figuring there was no harm in trying, but it was still somewhat

disappointing.

Dad saw his shoulders droop and seemed to get the wrong idea. “Is school going well?”

It was such a surprise to hear him ask about school, which he hardly ever did, that Julius couldn’t think of anything to say right away, and there was a weird little pause before he answered neutrally, “Yeah, pretty well overall.”

On the surface, Julius thought nobody could possibly complain about his performance there. His grades were good, needless to say; his teachers liked him; nobody in class picked on him. But it seemed that being part of one of the elite families who were supposedly descended from the Eleven Saints made him intimidating to other people. He didn’t have a single real friend. In fact, he was at the point where if someone would just talk to him, even if it was only because they thought he’d be a useful connection, he’d happily be their friend. But unfortunately, he went to an upper-class school, which meant they were just well-bred enough to rule that out.

Juli, you’re like the prince of some noble family!

It had felt nice to hear Kieli’s ridiculously artless reaction when he’d told her about his family...although at the moment she didn’t seem the least bit interested in becoming a noble princess.

As he sighed at this memory, the man beside him stopped walking. His father faced forward and straightened his posture a bit, so Julius stopped as well and looked down the passage ahead. Someone was walking up the long cloister toward them—a slim man wearing the long robe of the clergy’s highest order—who noticed them and looked up. “Well, hello, Mr. Candidate,” the man said, his gaunt cheeks softening. He saw Julius’s father stiffen, a conflicted expression on his face, and laughed out loud. He walked closer, gently chiding, “Now, now, don’t look so distressed. I’m sorry.”

“Please, don’t be ridiculous. I’m the one who owes you an apology.” His father bowed his head deferentially.

Now it was the newcomer’s turn to look distressed. His smile turned pained. “Come on, don’t be so formal.” This man didn’t seem to have the gravity and stately bearing you’d expect of someone with his rank—in fact, his presence was *less* commanding than the average person’s—but of course Julius knew who he was. He and Julius’s father had been friends since youth, but from what Julius heard, they’d been kind of distant ever since he’d become the youngest-ever member of the Council of Elders.

“And is that Julius? You’ve sure grown.”

Julius followed his father’s lead and nodded deferentially, too. “Thank you.” *Would he know about the lab? Then again, I can’t exactly just ask him about it out of the blue.* While he wavered, the two older men exchanged short pleasantries (“Want to have dinner together sometime?”) and broke off their conversation there to resume walking in opposite directions. They were both busy men, after all. Julius glanced over his shoulder as he scurried after his father to take one last look. Watching this man walk like any normal person down the freezing-cold cloister, shoulders slightly stooped, you’d never guess he was one of the foremost symbols of Church power. His robed back seemed so much *older* than Julius’s father’s, even though they were the same age. Lonelier, too. If Julius remembered right, he was unmarried and had no family.

It was a shame to think that if the man had a son or daughter, they’d have to be right around Julius’s age, and the two of them could have shared an easy friendship without having to worry about holding back on account of family status.

The whole journey from one end of the long cloister to the other took only a few minutes. Nothing memorable happened other than that he finally got to talk with his father again. It was just a day like any other.

CHAPTER 4

THE SUNLIT GARDEN WHERE IT
BEGAN, THE NIGHTTIME
LABYRINTH WITH NO END

I just hope God takes you away soon.

That was what his mother had always said when she was in a bad mood. She'd mumble it in response to just about anything, like some family curse passed down through the generations from her great-grandmother's great-grandmother. *I just hope God takes you away soon.*

He barely had any memories of her other than those words. He could remember his friends telling him *Man, your mom is so pretty*, but he couldn't really remember her face. Somehow he thought he'd never particularly considered her "pretty." All that really stuck in his mind was the impression that she'd been in a bad mood most days, and on the days when she wasn't, she'd always looked ready to start crying. That was all he knew...No, come to think of it, there was one other thing he remembered: she'd hated her rust-colored hair, so she'd always hid it under a scarf.

Maybe the reason she'd hated her son was that he'd inherited that exact same hair.

Not that there was any way to find out now. Not that he really cared to know anyway.

As he sat nimbly on the bar, smoking a cigarette and staring off into space, something rolled beneath his feet. A soccer ball, filthy with sand. Two small hands equally filthy with sand, enough sand to work its way underneath their short fingernails, picked it up and cradled it tenderly.

Still crouched there holding the ball, little Elisha looked up at him.

"Effy, wanna play?"

"That's 'Ephraim,'" he corrected her for form's sake. He'd given up on her actually listening by now. He'd never heard of anybody shortening "Ephraim" to "Effy," but Elisha didn't know how to spell, so she made up random nicknames based on the sounds she heard. She couldn't say "Ephraim," so she'd shortened it to "Effry," and then shortened *that* to "Effy."

"Let's play."

"Not happening," he said flatly. He turned and blew out his smoke in the other direction. She blinked up at him in surprise, and then brought the forefinger and thumb of one hand to her mouth, pursed her lips, and said "Fffft!" *What, are you trying to copy me or something?* When he glared at

her out of the corner of his eye, she stopped copying, and that face that almost never smiled brightened a tiny bit, as if she were having fun.

“Elisha, hurry up and bring back the ball!” cried another voice in the schoolyard. She hopped to her feet and ran over with the ball in her arms. The little kids waiting for the ball spread back out across the schoolyard and picked up their game again. They weren’t actually letting Elisha play with them; she was only the ball-fetcher. But she probably thought she was part of the game. She was hanging around the field, running after the ball with all the others and getting left behind along the way, and then when it came back, she’d chase it again and be left behind again.

It wasn’t a very big schoolyard. Other than the field, they only had the sand pit and the chin-up bars. As usual, the sky was cloudy and sand-colored. No matter how far he tilted back to look, it was always the same

“Ah!”

He overbalanced and tumbled backward off the bar. The world flipped upside down. At around the point where the ground was right overhead he managed to hook the backs of his knees around the bar and dangle there. “That was close...” The cigarette had almost slipped out of his mouth, so he resettled it between his lips.

Without really knowing why, he stayed like that, looking at the upside-down world. Even from the opposite direction, the sky was still the same old cloudy sand color. If “God” or whoever was really watching from the other side of it, he was sure the layer of dust pollution kept Him from ever having an unbroken view of the world below.

In a distant corner of their sky, the long, low *boom* of a cannon sounded.

That was the same as always, too: a boringly familiar sound. It was all just a part of his daily life.

Episode 1: Joachim

“How come Harry’s eye and arm are hurt?”

Hey! She just busted out with a question I wanted to ask but held off on!

“Is he your boyfriend, Kieli?”

Yeah, can you clarify that once and for all?

“Have you kissed?”

...*Well, have you?*

Bearfoot was listening in on the conversation between the two girls next to him and silently chiming in. Kids sure didn't mince words!

But in this case it wasn't really working as a “conversation,” since one girl kept asking her next question before the other had figured out how to answer the last one. Apparently Nana, who was famous for being as hard to please as they come and who never approached any of the adults in the troupe, had taken a shine to Kieli. She was bundled into the truck's passenger seat along with Kieli, playing with her teddy bear and keeping up an innocent barrage of questions.

It was the afternoon of the sixth day of the Colonization Days festivities, and the holiday was more than half over. They were running low on food and other things, so someone needed to go get more supplies. Kieli had volunteered to shop on behalf of all the performers, since they had to work, and they'd decided to elect one more person to go with her as driver and bag handler. Considering that this person would not only get the afternoon off, but also get to make a trip into town with Kieli, Bearfoot had happily nominated himself. But who'd have thought she'd have a kid in tow...? Well, okay, anyone who'd *thought* about it at all, actually.

So they'd borrowed the troupe leader's personal light truck, gone to the market by the central train station, bought a ton of food and daily supplies, done all the personal shopping and post office errands other performers had asked them to take care of as if they were some kind of odd-jobs service, and crammed the truck to the bursting point with bags and boxes. Now they were finally on their way home. A nice, peaceful conversation was going on in the passenger seat, but, to be honest, Bearfoot was just a tiny bit terrified. In fact, he was clutching the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white.

It had seemed like such a waste to go straight home and end their time together, so he'd had the bright idea of going back by a different route and having a bit of a drive. That had been his fatal mistake. Right now the truck was making its way slowly through the main street of southeastern downtown. Their shopping had eaten up a lot of time, so it was already pretty much sundown. This was when groups of sketchy guys started to hang out on either side of the street, and when all the prostitutes came out to make their pitches under the streetlights.

Westerbury's central city was the largest metropolis on the planet; a lot

of different people came here for a lot of different reasons. That meant it wasn't exactly a paradise of public safety. The Church Soldiers still policed the market, the area around the train station, and the upper-class residential neighborhoods of uptown, but downtown was well on its way to being a lawless zone. Pickpockets and purse-snatchers were common on the streets, of course, and it wasn't unusual for people to rob vehicles, either.

Damn, this sucks... He sighed, ignoring for the moment the fact that it was his own fault. He wanted to get out of here ASAP, but the people talking by the roadside were overflowing into the street itself, too; and sometimes they started to cross with no warning, so he couldn't build up any speed. By the time they got back to camp, his fellow entertainers would probably have wrapped up their jobs and started trickling back from the park.

Out of nowhere, he heard a *fwhoo* sound like a whoopee cushion coming from underneath his feet, and the body of the truck jolted downward. "Aw, man!" Bearfoot knew right away that something was wrong. So he pulled over into the shoulder and stepped on the brake. Then he jumped down to take a look, leaving the two girls looking confusedly down from their perch on their seat. Circling around to the front, he peered down and saw that, just as he'd expected, the front tire was losing air. It looked as though they'd run over some piece of sharp, pointed metal. The litter in the streets here was as bad as the neighborhood crime rate.

"Do we...have a flat?" asked Kieli, leaning out of the passenger window. He replied with a noise somewhere between agreement and animal sorrow. She hopped out of her seat, said "Should we push it home?" as if it were nothing much, really, and began circling around to the back, actually gesturing as if she was about to roll up her sleeves.

"No, no, don't worry about it," he said to stop her. It might not be a big truck, but it was filled with cargo. It would be a lot harder for two people to push it back (and he wasn't about to let their other companion join the team) than she obviously thought. *And more to the point, I don't want to!* Fortunately, though, it wasn't a full-out flat, so he thought they could probably manage to make it as far as the camp before it gave out.

In fact, the larger issue here was how scary the truck's owner was going to be when he found out...For a moment he pictured the troupe leader's harsh face and started trying to come up with a good excuse, but just then—

“No!” said Nana, in a voice just short of a scream. He and Kieli both started and turned to look at the passenger seat, only to see one of the young punks who’d been loitering by the roadside sticking halfway into the truck through the driver’s-side window, rooting around inside the cab. He’d grabbed the wallet Bearfoot had left sitting on the seat (he’d been carrying a lot of the troupe’s money for this trip, too!). Now he was in the process of ripping the radio right out of the dashboard.

“Hey!” As Bearfoot started for the driver’s door, the whole truck gave a rattling lurch. Other youngsters, presumably friends of the first one, had piled into the bed from behind. When the one in the front seat shook off Nana, who was grabbing at him, and pulled away from the truck, the group in the back did the same, taking their pick of whatever was closest and then scattering.

“Bearfoot!”

Kieli turned to him as if to say *One of us has to go after them!* “Huh? Wha—” There were five or six of them, and they looked like seriously bad news. He couldn’t help it; he went weak in the knees with fear (*No, this isn’t me being a coward! There’s a difference between bravery and recklessness!*). But before he had time to even say anything, Nana jumped down from the truck and tore past both of them after the thieves. “H-Hey!”

Dumbfounded, he somehow managed to grab her by the collar and haul her back, at which point she promptly burst into tears. Her two tiny hands stretched out in front of her, reaching for something. “Mr. Bear! Mr. Bear!”

Mr. Bear? Come to think of it, he kind of thought he’d seen the guy take Nana’s teddy bear along with the car radio when he pushed her off. “Whoa, wait! Kieli?!”

“Please stay with Nana!”

“I said *wait!*”

Kieli ignored him and took off running after the teddy bear thief—that is, the guy who’d robbed the truck. “Wai—ow, ow, ow!” And while Nana clawed at him, trying to get free and go with her, she melted right into the crowd, and he lost sight of her. For a few seconds, both arms wrapped around the struggling Nana, he was completely at a loss.

“...Oh, crap!” This was no time to just stand around like a moron. Bearfoot shoved Nana into the passenger’s seat and swung himself up into the cab.

The thieves split up into two groups as they ran, so Kieli dived around the corner of the alley where she'd seen the man who'd fished around in their driver's seat go.

Huh...?

No one was there. She knew she'd seen two of the men come this way, but now they were gone. Beneath the copper-and-slate evening sky the alley stretched on, covered with trash and completely deserted. As she stepped into it, looking left and right, something fell on the ground a few meters ahead of her. Yes, there was a teddy bear lying buried in a heap of trash on the street, smiling at her a little sadly.

She started to run up to it, but then something brought her up short. When she craned her neck to look at the spot the bear had fallen from, she saw two shadowy figures standing on an outside staircase that ran along the wall. One on a landing about halfway up the first flight, and one a little farther up, watching her with their elbows propped against the railing.

"How about you come get it?" one of them teased. The other let out a choked laugh.

Half of her mind was warning her not to go, but she wanted to get Nana's toy back. Kieli understood just as painfully well as Nana, or maybe even better than Nana, how precious a playmate a stuffed animal could be at that age.

Gulping, she cautiously walked up to the fallen bear. She kept a careful eye on the staircase above her as she stooped down to pick it up. Just as her hand connected with it, there was a *crash* behind her, and her heart leapt in her chest. When she whirled around to look, the man who'd been on the landing was standing right in front of her. He'd jumped down to block her way out. Now he was tossing something from one hand to the other, toying with it. A folding knife...

Kieli remembered what she'd thought after capturing the burglar: *If he'd been older or maybe even had a knife, I could've gotten really hurt.* And the Corporal had even warned her, and she'd promised to be careful!

She inched backward, hugging the toy to her chest, but the man's friend stopped her by jumping down from the steps right behind her. So she tried to run instead, but he grabbed her hair from behind and yanked her back. "No!"

"It's dangerous for a little girl to wander into an alley like this alone, you know." *You're the ones making it dangerous!* Kieli's heart cried back at him as she tried to pull free. The man with the knife grabbed her arm,

knocking the teddy bear loose and sending it flying.

Let me go! she tried to shout, but she couldn't get the sound to come out of her throat. Now that her body couldn't move, her brain was finally catching up and realizing just how frightening this really was. *I'm scared, please, somebody...HARVEY!*

And as if in response to her unconscious call for help, suddenly a hand reached out and grabbed the knife man's wrist.

When the knife man turned around, there was a tall, skinny man there. Relieved, Kieli turned her head up to look at him—and then went blank-faced herself. *Who is that?* He looked the same height and age as Harvey, but he wasn't the coppery-haired man she knew. He was a young man in a long, high-collared coat. She'd never seen him before.

Her attacker's arm was now twisted behind his own back. He writhed and screamed in pain, but the man in the coat was apparently stronger than he looked. He didn't even twitch. "Let me go, you bastard!" snarled the thief. In a frenzy, he threw a punch with his free hand, but the stranger dodged effortlessly with a little tilt of his head. Then he planted his own fist right in the knife man's face.

There was a horrible wet crunch.

The knife man let out a strangled scream, his knees giving way. But the stranger kept hold of his wrist—and with his opponent dangling there like a rag doll, he administered one, two, *three* merciless knee-jabs to the solar plexus before casually letting go as if he'd abruptly gotten bored with the whole thing. Seeing his friend lying crumpled pathetically on the street right in front of him, the thief pulling Kieli's hair gave a little whine of fear and then leapt backward.

Finally released, Kieli found herself sinking to the ground, suddenly limp. One look at the face of the man passed out on the pavement at her knees made her gasp. His nose must be broken...there was so much blood, she could hardly believe he'd only taken one punch.

When she raised her face to stare dumbfounded at the stranger, she understood. There was a fist-sized hunk of asphalt in his hand. He was glancing down at it in displeasure, cocking his head to one side as if he was disappointed with how it handled.

"What the hell; this guy's dangerous....," mumbled the other thief nervously, backing away. The stranger slowly looked up at him. Then he grinned slightly with just one side of his mouth. Bloody concrete still in his hand, he stomped on the fallen man's wrist (there was another wet

crunch) and picked up the knife that rolled down onto the ground.

With a whimper, the thief spun around like the hounds of hell were at his heels and started to run. “Not so fast,” said the man in the long coat. They were the first words he’d spoken. The thief stopped dead in his tracks, turning his neck just far enough to look back over his shoulder.

“I’ll kill him if you don’t take him with you, you know. He’s an eyesore.” To illustrate his point, he kicked the unconscious man aside like so much trash. The accomplice ran quickly back to them, making panting noises that didn’t seem to mean anything in particular anymore. He hauled his friend up and more or less dragged him away down the alley, leaving them with the completely unoriginal parting shot of “Just you wait!”

Until the hollow echoes of his words finished bouncing off the dusky concrete walls and faded, Kieli sat exactly where she was, staring after them. The man in the long coat was looking in the same direction until he abruptly turned to Kieli and said, “Wow. Did you hear that? I didn’t know anybody actually said that.”

He had a knife in one hand and a bloody lump of concrete in the other, yet the expression on his face was so utterly ordinary as he said this that Kieli was struck dumb. *This guy is not normal.*

“Did they hurt you?”

“No...Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he answered brightly, tossing the concrete aside. The knife he stuck in his pocket, as if it went without saying that it belonged to him now. Then he held out a hand to her and asked, “Can you stand?”

...The hand was sticky with the blood of the thug. He seemed to realize that she was hesitating and looked down at it. He offered his other hand instead, withdrawing the bloody one and *licking off* the palm.

He was definitely kind of strange...no, he was definitely *really* strange, but Kieli couldn’t see any reason to refuse the clean hand. So she timidly reached up, and he grasped her by the hand, clasped it with his own, smiled at her, and said, “So you’re not hurt, then. I guess I screwed up. Maybe I came to the rescue a little too soon? If they’d just damaged your face a little, Ephraim’s reaction could have been so much *fun*.”

“...Pardon?” Kieli gaped up at the man’s face. He’d said the words with such matter-of-fact cheerfulness that for a moment she couldn’t understand what they meant.

“Just kidding—no, actually, I meant that pretty seriously.” He made

these amendments with no change of expression. His voice passed in one of Kieli's ears and out the other.

She felt all the blood drain from her face.

The pleasant but unremarkable features, the way his very unremarkability was the remarkable thing about him, the strange sort-of-there, sort-of-not presence he projected...Kieli was sure it wasn't her own poor memory that had kept her from recognizing him right away. After all, he was the kind of person you'd forget after five minutes, and she hadn't seen him in two whole years.

The only characteristic he had that left any sort of impression was the blue-gray of his eyes. The same color as Westerbury's bright night sky.

"Joa...chim...? But you can't be..."

They'd told her he was dead. He'd died two years ago.

Still sitting, she tried to back away, but he had a firm grip on her hand, and she couldn't move. The cold touch of his fingers sent a chill all the way up her arm. Still, she tried her best to crawl away from him with her other arm and legs—but it was as if her nerves were going numb; she couldn't get her limbs to obey.

"Let me go..." Kieli was ashamed to hear how weak and hoarse her own voice sounded. She protested desperately as she jerked her captured hand. "Let me go...let me go, let me go...!"

The man in front of her blinked as if he couldn't think why she'd be so afraid. "Wait, he didn't say anything about me?"

"What...do you mean...?"

"You haven't heard about what happened in the capital?"

Kieli shook her head the barest fraction, not really confirming or denying, just stunned. Yes, she'd just heard about the capital—about the lab creating Undyings, at least. But no, she hadn't heard anything, nothing about this man. Even though Harvey'd said that was everything...



Maybe something about her reaction tickled Joachim, because he burst out laughing. “Ahaha, he just never changes! I bet he’s still hiding all kinds of stuff from you then, isn’t he?” *How the heck am I supposed to know that?!* The longer Kieli stayed lost in morose speechlessness, the more amused he seemed, until he couldn’t stifle his laughter anymore. And then, with no warning, he plopped down onto one knee beside her, looked her straight in the eye, and asked insinuatingly, “Would you like to know? I could tell you.” Obviously she ought to say no, but for some reason Kieli couldn’t answer right away. Instead, she ended up gazing back at those eyes peering at her from so close. “If you want to know, come over to my place.”

“What are you...saying...?” She tried to peel her eyes away from his as fast as she could, but they were fathomless, blue-gray as the sky, and they held her spellbound.

That was when the rumble of a somewhat off-kilter truck broke the silence around them. And then the short squeal of its sudden stop—

—And then—

“Kieli!”

The voice calling her name saved her, breaking her from her trance. She tore her gaze away from the man in front of her and turned to look for its owner. A small truck was parked at the alley’s entrance. As she watched, a little girl hopped down out of the passenger seat.

Then two things happened at once: Bearfoot followed after Nana, coming down out of the driver’s side, and another truck pulled to a stop with its nose sticking right into the bed of theirs. A black truck. One of the Church Soldiers’ city patrol trucks. The air between Kieli and Joachim was already tight with tension. Now a different kind of tension joined it. Joachim gave a low grunt of annoyance and then stood up, pulling Kieli up with him almost as an afterthought.

Kieli shot him a glare and slapped his hand away. Nana was just coming up to them, running toward Kieli, so she opened her arms and caught the girl up in a hug. “I’m sorry about your bear...” She reached out to pick up the now-dirty stuffed animal, but Nana shook her head violently from side to side and clung even tighter.

“Kieli, you’re okay?! I was worried!”

Bearfoot called out to them and began jogging closer, two of the Church Soldiers’ city guards in tow. Yes, Bearfoot must have found them for her. She glared at Joachim out of the corner of her eye as he began oh-

so-innocently explaining, “I’m sorry, I saw them and came to help, but they got away.” (*That faker!*)

She considered just opening her mouth and shouting, *This man is an Undying! Please help me, he’s going to eat me!* But when she imagined herself saying those words she felt awful, so she kept quiet. Plus, there was also the fact that it’d be a serious problem for her if that made a bunch of Undying Hunters gather in Westerbury.

“All right then, I’ll just be on my way,” concluded Joachim at the end of a largely one-sided speech. Evidently he wasn’t inclined to stay long under the circumstances. He turned on his heel and began walking off... but as he passed by Kieli, he crouched down a bit and leaned in right next to her ear to whisper, “Come on by if you ever want to hear the story.” Then he gave an address on a street she recognized. His lips brushed lightly against her ear as he spoke, and she shuddered, ducking away. Joachim chose that moment to tack on one last thing: “Ephraim’s going to die one of these days, you know. His core isn’t working right.”

Kieli didn’t understand what he was talking about. But when she looked back up, Joachim wasn’t beside her anymore. She was barely in time to watch that tall, lean back just like another one she knew so well stride off into the darkness of the alley. Somehow while she hadn’t been paying attention, night had invaded and overtaken the sky.

Since the Church Soldiers and Bearfoot immediately began asking her all sorts of questions, it wasn’t until after she’d been released from questioning that she thought over those final words of his again.



“...Okay, look.” Having her stare straight at him like that for so long made him uncomfortable. He carefully kept his gaze trained somewhere just shy of direct eye contact, yet where he could still keep her face in his peripheral vision. He could feel the strain in his face. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” Kieli answered in a hard voice. Her expression didn’t change, and her eyes didn’t waver.

Liar.

“Your turn, Harvey,” said Rat, who was sitting to his left, and motioned to Harvey with his eyes. If he was trying to hide that stifled laugh, he

wasn't doing a very good job. Harvey shot him a sidelong glare and then looked down at his cards. He flipped through them lightly with his left hand to check their contents, picked one out of the five, and slid it to the center of the table. When the dealer slid another card back toward him, he stopped it with his fingertips, glanced at it, and drew it into his hand.

Harvey knew full well that it was a clumsy way to play cards, and he had to wonder if watching him was making the others impatient. But Kieli didn't seem disposed to help him out today. She wasn't even playing this game, but she'd made a point of inserting herself in a chair directly across from him. Her chin was propped on one hand so that she almost seemed to be leaning on the radio she'd set on the table, and she was watching him with unblinking eyes.

What the hell is up here?

Dinner was over, everybody'd wrapped up their little planning sessions or mini-rehearsals, but it was still a bit too early to go to bed. This was the brief time of day when the performers enjoyed the most freedom (or so Harvey'd been told; he wasn't really wired for that kind of thing, so it pretty much went over his head). For some reason whenever he was in the camp at this time of night, he got roped into a card game. Five or six of them would drag an oil stove out to the clearing for warmth and sit around a table under one of the lights together.

Bearfoot and Rat were usually joined at the hip, but Bearfoot wasn't playing today. Apparently he'd gotten royally chewed out by Shiman. He'd trudged right past them back to his trailer earlier, looking a little despondent.

Harvey'd gotten a rundown of the robbery last night. They'd lost some of their supplies, somewhat more money than they'd have liked, and a car radio; but it sounded as if everybody was just happy that Kieli and Nana weren't hurt. It'd be tough to steal their things back from the downtown punks, anyway. There was no way the Church Soldiers would put any serious effort into investigating some downtown crime, and even if they did, most of the stuff would've been pawned or fenced by now.

He'd give Bearfoot a good kick later, but mostly he was preoccupied with pointless regret, wondering if he should've gone with her. Shiman had told him to be her escort himself if he didn't have anything better to do, but he'd flatly turned the man down—not because he thought shopping was a pain in the ass (though there was that), but because, although Shiman seemed to have forgotten it, Harvey was...well...

I'm not any good at the damn things, I told you that.

Mysteriously, Harvey just didn't seem to have any driving skills. Not with motorbikes, trucks, or anything else.

"Everybody's made his bet? Okay, show your hands!"

The players all started spreading their cards on the table, following the dealer's instructions. Harvey jerked his attention back to the game and fumbled his own cards over. There were the five blue picture cards from the liberation army suit: judge, sword, revolution, bishop's staff, and shepherd.

"Wait, wait, hold everything!" shouted Rat next to him, shooting suddenly up from his deck chair, which toppled over and hit the dirt with a modest but still annoying crash.

"What's your problem?"

"How many times is that? How many times?! Nobody gets that many flushes! It's not possible!"

"What are you trying to say?" Harvey asked, narrowing his left eye. Not to be outdone, Rat glared right back and went on in a low voice, "You're cheating, aren't you?"

"What's your proof?"

"..."

All the other performers gulped nervously at the hostility between the two of them, and the bustle of conversation around the table went quiet all at once. Amidst this tense silence Harvey and Rat held each other's stares for several seconds...and then they both sighed tiredly and looked away. "Well, whatever." Harvey couldn't concentrate on the game anyway. Not while she was *looking* at him with that gaze so sharp it was almost as if she was using it to physically get between him and the other man. Nobody else seemed to know what to do with this girl who'd broken into their all-male party with no fear whatsoever only to wordlessly stare at one fixed point. That one point, of course, being his face.

Harvey hung his head and groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Come on, *what?* Just say it."

"...Liar."

For a moment he missed that short, snarled answer, and pure habit made him respond with a "Huh?" even as he looked up at her face.

His whole body jolted with surprise.

Kieli'd kept her face a perfect mask up to this moment, but now there were tears in her eyes. She pressed her lips together, trying to hold them

back, and looked down. But then before he even had time to think, she spat the word at him again, a little stronger this time: “Liar!” She kicked her chair over, standing up from it so quickly. The radio spewed static, trying to stop her, but she abandoned it and bolted out of their ring of light into the shadows behind the trailers.

“Wha...?” Harvey’s hand still rested, forgotten, on the back of his head. Astonishment froze him in place.

Until the other card players all started giving him looks anyway, clearly blaming him for something. Rat looked half-exasperated, half-triumphant. “What’d you do to her, man?”

“Hell if I know,” Harvey retorted, giving him a sideways glare. He felt sheepish somehow, though, so he averted his eye before long.

Did I do something wrong today...? He sifted through his memories, but nothing sprang to mind. Well, sure, he’d done plenty of things wrong, but he was pretty sure he hadn’t done any of them *today*.

Soon enough the group’s mood recovered, and they started up another round of cards. Harvey’s mind was only half on the game, though, so he lost big.

Just outside the trailer, Kieli bumped into one of the dancing women. “Oh, Kieli, are you turning in for the night?” She was holding a towel and a change of clothes. Kieli guessed she must be heading for the shower. “They say we’ll have hot water tonight! Thank God, after the water heater was on the fritz yesterday. Wanna come?”

It was a nice invitation, but Kieli just shook her head and slipped past, climbing into the trailer and burrowing under her bedcovers without even bothering to change into her pajamas first. Her bunk was just to the right of the back door. The other women had tried to get her to take a warmer place near the middle of the room, since she was a “guest.” Kieli, however, thought of herself as just an ordinary freeloader, so she’d convinced them to let her take the empty space near the door. And after all, this way, when she saw Harvey sneaking out at night, she could slip out and follow him without having to step on anybody.

Liar, repeated her heart on an endless loop. She pulled the blanket up over her head.

He’d told her about the research facility in the capital, but now she knew he hadn’t told her anything about what was most immediate and important of all to her: himself. He hadn’t said anything about meeting

Joachim in the capital. And what had Joachim meant about Harvey's core not working right...?

In hindsight, there'd been clues everywhere. She didn't think his minor injuries were healing as fast as they used to, and it was weird that the right arm he'd lost two years ago hardly seemed to be growing back at all, and now that she really thought about it, it was only recently that the Corporal had started going overboard with his lectures about every tiny scrape and bruise. The Corporal must have found out about this not too long ago.

Ephraim's going to die one of these days, you know.

Going to die one of these days...going to die one of these days...

A voice was echoing round and round in Kieli's head. At first it was Joachim's unremarkable voice, but the tones were steadily overwritten in her memory until it started to sound like Harvey himself speaking the words.

Harvey, die before Kieli? The possibility had never even occurred to her. Not even as a one-in-a-million chance. She had known all along that they couldn't be together forever, she thought she knew that now—but she'd had a vague certainty that their parting would come when he finally kicked her out of his life, or when she was really old, or when she died. Even that time when she'd heard that he might've died in the capital, she'd been able to tell herself that he wasn't like normal people, and so he couldn't have died—but if he was like normal people after all, he really could have died like anyone else.

"No...", she murmured underneath the covers. Even to her own ears it sounded muffled and weak. It sounded as if she were about to cry like some spoiled kid. She couldn't imagine a world without Harvey. She didn't want to imagine one. Because Harvey *was* her world.

...No, I can't cry...

She focused her energy behind her eyes, willing the tears back down. The reason he'd been able to tell the Corporal but not her must be that he hadn't wanted to see her cry. She told herself that she had to get it together, and it just made her painfully aware of her own powerlessness. It was because she *didn't* have it together that she couldn't get him to talk to her about anything...

Still cocooned in the blanket, Kieli shifted until she could curl up into a ball with her arms wrapped around her knees. It really was chilly next to

the door. Once the bed had cooled off, her body heat wasn't enough to warm it up very much.

"Kieli?" said an innocent voice overhead. Kieli tugged the blanket down just enough for one eye to peek out. Nana was crouched on all fours next to her pillow, peering at her. When had Nana gotten here? "Does your tummy hurt?"

The little girl looked so serious that Kieli floundered a little. "Um... no." Then she realized that Nana had brought her own pillow and her teddy bear along. She was clutching the pillow to her stomach so that as she crouched she was almost lying on top of it. Now she shyly dragged it up and asked, "Is it okay if I sleep here? Mama says she has to clean up more stuff."

Instead of answering, Kieli scooted toward the wall and lifted the blanket up. Nana burrowed in underneath it with teddy and pillow. Now they were crammed in tight, since the bunk was a little narrow even for one person, but when the two of them (plus bear) snuggled together with the blanket pulled up over them, it was warmer than before.

It was a touch too early for the adults to go to sleep. They could hear distant noise and talking somewhere far off beyond the walls, but inside the trailer it was just the two of them. *Maybe I'm just like Nana*, Kieli thought. She was a lot older than Nana, so she needed to be able to do so many more things, but just like Nana, she was always left back at the camp, always unconditionally protected...

"...Hey Nana, would you be okay without me here tomorrow?" she asked the top of Nana's head, which was tucked under her chin. Without lifting her cheek from her pillow, Nana tilted her head to look up at Kieli with big eyes that somehow seemed expressive even without much open emotion in them, and just mumbled "Mm-hmm" before turning her eyes back down again. Kieli guessed it was the reaction she'd expected. (Lately she'd grown able to call Nana's reactions. She could kind of see what Harvey'd meant, calling them "birds of a feather.")

"There's something I've got to do. I'm sorry..."

Tentatively stroking Nana's hair as the younger girl nestled her face into the pillow, Kieli gazed at the blue-tinged gray darkness of the trailer wall.

I'll go tomorrow.



In the morning, the slums were so dead of any activity that it was hard to believe all the nighttime uproar had really happened. The “tired” vibe hung sluggishly over the neighborhood now the way she would have expected it to at night. Maybe it was too early for the people who lived here to be out and about.

She stood in a slum in northeastern downtown. There was a reason she’d recognized the street name when he’d given her the address: the abandoned building in front of her was only a few blocks from Christoph and Toby’s apartment. In fact, it was the very same building where Harvey and Christoph had played tag on the fire escape.

Letting her eyes trace the cracked concrete walls up to the rooftop from her position on the street, she made it out to be seven stories. Most of the panes were gone from the windows, leaving nothing but rows of gaping dark caverns, but there were ones on the second and seventh floors that still had glass in them.

Kieli turned her back on the building for the moment and looked across the street. Between the crumbling rooftops of the slum, she could make out the park clock tower veiled in sandy gas.

You can see the clock tower from it. That’s what he’d said. The second floor was probably at borderline height, so the seventh floor was a better bet. The front entrance was locked; she circled around to the alley in the back and climbed up the fire escape. The dilapidated staircase creaked. It sounded strangely loud in the deserted alley.

When she peeked inside through the emergency door on the seventh floor, there was a long, narrow hallway stretching ahead of her into the building. It was blanketed with a snowfall of fine debris and shards of glass. The doors along one side were in the same state as the windows; that is, mostly missing. Light from outside filtered in through the empty frames to fall on the floors beyond. Kieli gave herself a chance to catch her breath, and then slid feetfirst into the hallway. A piece of glass crunched softly under her boot.

She could hear running water somewhere nearby. Apparently the pipes were still working. *Yeah, if you were going to squat somewhere, the one thing you’d want to make sure it had would be water.*

The fourth room from where she stood still had a door, which was ajar. It seemed as if the sounds of the water were coming from inside. Kieli called up her mental picture of the building’s exterior and decided that the area that still had window glass was right around here, too. She surveyed

the room from around the corner of the door, and when she didn't see anyone there, she pushed it a little further open and slid inside, careful not to make a sound as her eyes swept her surroundings.

So there's nobody here... After all that, it was sort of a letdown.

By the look of things, this place had been a cheap hotel, the kind with only tiny, simple rooms. A sofa with springs sticking out everywhere that was far past saving and a low, lopsided table took up half of this one. Along the far wall stood a bed covered in dusty blankets.

There was another half-open door in one of the side walls. It must lead to the bathroom; from the other side of it came the same water sounds, more clearly than before. *That way, maybe?*

Kieli crept up close, keeping her footsteps and her breath both soft. Just as she drew her face up close to the door frame to peek inside, she abruptly realized something and stopped short. Wouldn't peeking into a bathroom she knew someone might be using normally be pretty bad? Not that the business that brought her here today was exactly "normal." It was so hard to make up her mind...

"Yo," said a voice very suddenly from just behind her ear. She instinctively tried to jump aside, but an arm wrapped around her neck from behind and yanked her. Icy terror gripped her heart at how warm and waterlogged he felt clinging to her back. She shuddered.

"You need to be a little more careful. At least consider the possibility of an intruder-detecting device on the door."

"Let me go!" Kieli struggled and kicked, trying to pry his arm away, but of course her strength was no match for his. So instead she curled her fingers into talons and clawed him as hard as she could with both hands. But something was wrong; his skin felt...mushy. *Hmm?* With her neck still locked in place, she had to look down by moving her eyes. She gulped. The skin of the lower arm protruding from his sleeve was pulpy, as though someone had stirred it with a poker.

"No! No..." Kieli bent her body backward and fought for all she was worth. This time she was released with no fuss. Nearly stumbling from the excess momentum, she immediately ran for the nearest wall and practically plastered her back to it as she turned around to face him again. The sight of his face gave her an even greater shock.

The left side of it was normal, but the skin of its whole right side from his temple all the way down his cheek was a greenish color and looked as though it had been boiled. Just like Christoph...

“Now that’s just not nice. You wound me,” Joachim complained. Halfway through the grumble he was seized by a coughing fit. Eventually he heaved a dark gob of something that could have been a piece of his own rotten internal organs onto the floor. Kieli tried to move backward without thinking and only succeeded in bashing the back of her head into the wall. She had to clap a hand over her mouth when she felt her own stomach lurch in sympathy. And that was the position she stiffened and froze in as she watched Joachim crumple to the floor cradling his stomach. She stared in astonishment.

After a while, she moved the hand that had been covering her mouth enough to timidly ask, “Why did this happen to you?” *You looked just fine yesterday!*

Joachim didn’t answer. Still doubled over, he wearily lifted the green-skinned arm and pointed further into the room. In the direction of his finger lay the bed. Kieli guessed he must be telling her to take him there.

“Why should I?” she protested. But it looked as though an *unwillingness* to answer wasn’t his problem; he *couldn’t* answer. After several seconds’ hesitation, she carefully stepped away from the wall. She didn’t see how she had a choice, really.

She approached him cautiously, one step at a time, ready to run the instant there was trouble. Even when she came close enough to touch, however, Joachim showed no signs of moving. So she crouched down and tugged experimentally at the sleeve of his shirt. Well, that definitely wasn’t going to get them anywhere. She grabbed his normal arm with both hands instead and dragged him across the floor to just beside the bed.

When Joachim set his own hand on the bed, Kieli jumped away in a flash and ran to her old position by the wall. She’d done her best to avoid touching him in any of the gross spots, but her coat was wet at the chest and sleeves.

Joachim, on the other hand, was wet as a drowned rat from head to toe. It looked as though she’d interrupted him throwing up in the bathroom with the shower running. His shirt was so soaked she could see through it; looking closely, she realized “thin” wasn’t the right word at all for him. He’d lost such an incredible amount of weight that he seemed literally skin and bones. *Maybe there’s...not much left inside his body...?* No normal person could still be alive like this, obviously.

In the end he crawled up onto the bed on his own and scooted right up next to the wall before turning around to sit with his back against it. Then

he slumped, head drooping. “Sometimes—I can’t control my energy—and it just—goes haywire...I’m better off than that—*failure*, though.” His speech was broken, but the illness must have calmed down enough to let him talk, at least. His tone held the same old sarcasm as always.

Finally, an answer to her question. And it clicked. *Oh, so that’s it. He got reanimated with a replica core, just like Christoph. So it makes sense that he’s alive again even though I was so sure he was dead. And what he said about seeing Harvey in the capital—if they met in the lab, then that all fits together, too. Did he run away just like Christoph, too, then, and that’s why he’s hiding here...?*

Without moving away from the wall, she said in a hard voice, “I didn’t come here to play nurse. I came to ask you about the capital, and about Harvey. You said you’d tell me.”

Joachim didn’t lift his head, but he twisted the corner of his mouth up in what would have been a wry smile on someone more human. “So mean. You—really don’t like me, do you?”

“I hate you!” Of course she did. He was the guy who’d killed Harvey once two years ago.

As if reading her mind, he grumbled, “Sheesh. He killed me, too, so we’re even, aren’t we?” He coughed again, more lightly this time, and spat a bloody hunk of *something* onto the bedclothes. The black, coal-tar-like blood wriggled there like a living thing for a few seconds, but it quickly stopped moving.

Dong...Ding-dong...

In the distance, a bell sounded. When she shifted her gaze from the bed to the window, she could see a little of the clock tower over the roof of the building across the street. It was the toll she could hear faintly even from the camp, the one that heralded noon. She’d stopped by the park before coming here to drop Nana off with Bearfoot, so she didn’t have to get home before evening.

“Well, have a seat.” Joachim motioned with his jaw toward the sofa with the escaped springs and peeling upholstery. Kieli highly doubted it would be comfortable to sit on. “No tea for you, though. Oh, come to think of it—” He grinned for a moment, as if he’d thought of a good prank to pull. Then he switched to the same gentle, sincere voice and expression that he’d used two years ago as a priest (though half his face was ruined now). “You like hot chocolate, if I remember right. Sorry, I’ll treat you next time.”

Kieli's spine itched. She rubbed it against the wall and answered him with no humor on her face. "I don't want anything. And I'll stay standing."

"What an unkind girl. You were so much more honest and stupid and cute back then," he informed her with casual rudeness. Then he sighed tiredly and dropped his gaze to somewhere between his splayed legs. After a pause for breath, he gave another malicious smile. "So, where should I start? Oh, and just to warn you, I do lie sometimes. Think for yourself about which things are lies and where the truth starts. I'm not giving you any hints."

And with this preface, he began offhandedly telling the story of the capital.



When he asked if everything was all right, the boy thought for a minute, and then said, "Yeah, I think so...Brother is doing well. Mom's happy, too—she even made meatloaf for him last night. That's his favorite. It might be the first time I've had any since the day before he left." He looked so happy as he reported this that Harvey couldn't bring himself to grill the kid about it. He hadn't come here to hear about meatloaf, though. "Come in and stay for a while."

"Nah. Thanks, kid. You go on back."

He parted with the boy after just a brief check-in and watched him run back to the apartment building. As he leaned against the wall of the alleyway and gazed at the window of the corner room on the first floor from this distance, the radio said smugly from beneath his chin, "*You say it's none of your business, but here you are worrying. Coming all the way out here to check on them, too!*"

"I'm not worried about him," Harvey answered sulkily. He wished he hadn't brought the stupid thing along. Thanks to Kieli's incomprehensible behavior during the card game last night he'd had to go back to his trailer alone, and he'd wound up with the radio in his possession as a side effect. He hadn't seen her once this morning, either. The others all said she'd left early with Nana to visit the park. It seemed to him that she'd completely broken her promise to do whatever he said, but the whole search for the "moving corpse" had been settled, and his conscience was far from clear where she was concerned, so he was reluctant to make an issue of it.

The Corporal had hounded him with questions last night, mostly variations on “*What the hell did you do this time, you bastard?!*” (And what did he mean by “this time”?) However, Harvey was just as stumped about this last argument as the radio was. He honestly didn’t have a clue. At this point, he pretty much just wanted to say *Whatever; please just don’t give me anything else to worry about.*

Speaking of the park, there was still that weird magnetic field he’d been ignoring. Dammit, the moment he settled one thing, some other problem always cropped up...

Now his temples were throbbing. Harvey winced. Habit made him reach for the cigarettes and lighter in his pocket. He lit up, took a drag, and felt the smoke make its way to his brain, easing his headache somewhat... It had certainly occurred to him that he had a full-blown dependency on the stuff at this point, in several senses.

Given the others he’d seen at the lab, he didn’t see any reason to assume that Christoph would be able to maintain his human mind or sanity forever. And when he thought about that he couldn’t get it out of his mind, until finally he’d ended up coming out here to look in on him (did that count as “worrying”? Not that he wanted to admit to *that*, of course).

And there was one more thing he couldn’t get out of his mind. A personal thing.

“I was just wondering why he came back.”

“*Excuse me? Do people need a reason to go home?*”

“That’s not what I mean.” Harvey guessed he hadn’t been clear enough. He tried again. “I meant, I was wondering how he remembered where his home was.”

The radio answered with the sort of silence that meant it didn’t even know what question to ask next. That was when he first realized they were having a more fundamental problem than how “clear” he was being: he was saying things that just plain didn’t make any sense to his companion. He looked down at the radio around his neck and blinked his left eye. “Wait...didn’t I ever tell you that I don’t remember anything from before I died?”

There was a few seconds’ pause.

“*No, you didn’t,*” replied the radio in a strangely flat tone.

After a moment it seemed to get its usual nagging groove back. From below his chin, Harvey was blasted with a burst of disgusted words and static. “*You bastard, it is way past too late for that little bombshell! You*

should've told me that years ago!"

"Well, I kind of thought I'd already said something..." He turned his head slightly to avoid taking the shout full-on and searched his memory. *Huh, so I hadn't told him?* It wasn't the type of thing he'd go out of his way to bring up, and it had always seemed so natural to him that maybe it'd never occurred to him to explain it to anyone else. "I mean, I was brain-dead for a while, you know?" he said matter-of-factly, as if it had nothing to do with him. Then he thought that maybe he'd been *too* matter-of-fact.

Just as the term "moving corpse" implied, Undyings were created through the reuse of corpses. During that first death the brain also died, naturally, so it had to be rare for someone to come out of the process with his memories intact, as Christoph had. Supposedly human brains were very delicate things, and just a few minutes without oxygen caused fatal damage.

"Now I finally see why you didn't know that song."

"What song was that?"

"Why, you..."

"Oh." He only remembered it after he'd already asked. They must be talking about that old song the ghost in the park had sung.

"You don't actually have a memory problem, do you? You just have this stupid habit of asking what something is before you even think about it."

...Okay, thought Harvey; I guess I can't deny that one.

He did have a few fragments of memories, but as far as the life before his reanimation was concerned, he didn't even remember where his own family had been from. Or how he'd died, or how he'd been born and raised, either, or anything about his parents or siblings—he didn't have any feelings about siblings as such, so he rather imagined he'd never had any, but that was as sure as he could be. His parents were even more of a mystery. Somehow he had the feeling that not remembering them meant there hadn't ever been any particularly good memories of them to begin with.

"That would explain why all the Undyings are so bankrupt personality-wise," said the radio, sounding as if he'd reached some profound understanding.

Harvey narrowed his eye. "Lay off." Then he let his gaze roam around the area, mumbling half to himself, "Anyway, isn't that why we were so

useful as instruments of war?” Someone with a decent personality, someone who had memories of being born to human parents, living his childhood, and growing up, would probably have a hard time becoming the kind of stone-cold killing machine people feared enough to call a “Demon of War”—though it was a little strange for *him* to be saying that. Those guys in the lab and in the waterways underneath Gate Town hardly had intelligence anymore, let alone personality; they were just monsters who instinctively destroyed things. And in truth, maybe it was only a thin, fine line that separated them from Harvey and the other Undyings.

There was a groaning noise.

Not this again... Harvey put a hand to his left ear and shook his head lightly.

Every so often he started to hear *their* voices moaning somewhere in the back of his mind like a sort of low tinnitus. He couldn’t do anything about it but wait until it naturally faded. It had been better for a while, but it was getting worse again since he’d met Christoph.

“...’m going home and not coming back.” He turned his back on the apartment building, tossing his spent cigarette to the ground and grinding it out as he did so.

“‘*Not coming back*’? Wait, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yeah. And when the Colonization Days holidays are over we’re leaving Westerbury. We need to start looking for Bea again, so we’ll head back to the border for a bit to —” He was going to the trouble of actually declaring his plans, which he never did, partly to remind himself of them. He wasn’t about to get mixed up in Christoph’s problems, or in *theirs*, any more than he already had.

He told himself it was none of his business, but he was pressing his hand to his ear again. That low ringing was still sounding deep in his ears—those groans that seemed to be cursing anyone and everyone who could hear, yet at the same time calling for help. He’d feel a lot better just being cursed.

It’s none of my business, it’s none of my business, Harvey repeated to himself stubbornly, although it wasn’t much more than a token protest by now. Each time he thought the words, it only brought back the memories.

A dark cave, groans filling the air, and the indistinct sounds of gunfire...



It happened while he was lying exhausted on the scaffolding that ran along the ceiling, forcing himself not to vomit at the awful stench filling the air. That was when he heard the roar.

A carbonization gun.

Reflex sent him springing to his feet at the sound of gunfire directly below him, and he came dangerously close to whacking his skull on the ceiling before his metal right hand cupped the back of his head and held him clear. He offered a silent thanks to the prosthetic and risked a look down, holding his breath in the shadows of the scaffolding's chain-link sides.

There were muffled voices muttering below him, and he could see two men walk up from the direction of the wall, which he couldn't see from this position, carrying something large between them. *What's that?*

Harvey pressed his face to the metal and squinted. His nausea immediately got worse.

Their cargo could only be called a decomposed body. Skin had rotted off, and the bones were starting to show through. In the vicinity of its heart was a smoldering black hole. The two men dragged the limp corpse along, each supporting one side.

Soon a heavy thud sounded somewhere beyond the darkness, and the workers returned unburdened, talking softly. They must have tossed it down a hole or something. Maybe they didn't even have any comments on this task of body disposal anymore; they chatted about utterly everyday things like whether the cafeteria's mincemeat-and-tendon soup tasted too strong or too weak. For all that the conversation was out of place, it was also strangely vivid, and Harvey clapped a hand over his mouth again to keep the rising acid down.

Gulping, he took a deep breath and pulled himself together. He'd never cared about meat one way or the other, since it wasn't as if he needed to eat, but he had the feeling he would always hate it now.

After he confirmed that there was no human presence left in the area, he hung his upper body off the edge of the scaffolding, surveying the space below him from upside-down. The only illumination came from pale, scattered emergency lights, so he didn't have a good view, but it seemed long and narrow, like a corridor. Small barred-off rooms like jail cells lined one side.

"Whoops..." While he'd hung there looking around, he'd almost slipped headfirst right off the platform. So he did a half-rotation about the

length of a somersault and hung suspended for an instant by just his right arm before dropping to the floor. His feet didn't make a sound when he landed, since he'd deadened most of the impact, but as his right hand let go it rattled the metal grating above his head and sent a surprisingly loud crash echoing up and down the hallway. "Gah, you idiot!" he spat at his partner in a whisper. He froze in a crouched position, alert to any movement nearby.

Luckily, the two body-carriers from before didn't come back. Harvey scanned the walls and ceiling for security cameras just to be on the safe side, but he didn't see any of those either. He breathed a sigh of temporary relief.

The floor beneath his feet was made of something like linoleum, but the walls and ceiling were bare rock. Right beneath the dim ceiling was a rusting walkway just wide enough to admit an assortment of pipes, large and small, plus one person.

These were the remains of a power plant cut into the rock walls of the capital's mountains. Before the War, this layer of the northern mountain range had supposedly been a treasure trove of high-purity fossil fuels. And now it was used as a facility for researching those lost fuels—or at least, that was the official story: just an ordinary research lab studying the use of natural resources.

There seemed to be relatively few workers for a facility of this size, so thus far he hadn't had the misfortune of bumping into any humans. It'd been drastically harder to move freely after entering the capital (though he knew that was only to be expected), and having to pull off the tricky task of infiltrating a top-secret facility had driven him to his wits' end, but now that he was actually inside the place, it was comparatively easy to get around.

A groan.

At first, Harvey wondered what kind of animal was making that noise. It was a long, low sound that seemed to crawl up to him, making the stagnant air just above the floor vibrate. A short time after it first reached his eardrums, he realized that the groan was coming from a human throat.

...They're alive...

He saw the shadows of living creatures squirming behind the iron bars that lined the wall. It seemed as if countless forms were packed into the narrow spaces, piled on top of one another, but from this distance he couldn't really see enough to tell for sure. He crawled on hands and knees

a little closer and peered into one of the tiny cells—and then he gasped and somehow forgot to breathe.

The *thing* closest to him lay on its back, a fist-sized black stone buried in its gaping chest cavity. Inside the stone, a dull amber light flickered like a heartbeat. The figure twitched jerkily in time with it, and with each convulsion skin cells seemed to bubble up from the inside only to quickly rot off.

A choking sound escaped Harvey's mouth when he finally drew breath again, and in that moment *it* turned glaring eyes on him. Harvey let out a bleat of surprise at the hand that suddenly shot through the bars to grab at his shirt, but just in the nick of time his false right arm gleamed, slapping it away.

Clang!

The instant *its* hand bounced off the iron bar, there was a low buzz on top of the noise the impact made. The hand was snatched back as if repelled, and then *it* stopped moving for good—now it only stared pleadingly at Harvey, pupils dilated.

“Th-Thanks...” Harvey tore his gaze from *its* eyes and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his shirtsleeve. The motor in his prosthetic's elbow gave a quiet, sort of proud-sounding purr, as if it had cleared its name after that little blunder earlier. “Nah, that doesn't even count as a blunder. Idiot.” If they were going to define this in terms of who owed whom, Harvey was already up to his eyeballs in debt. Relieved somewhat by the presence of his partner, he shook off the horror and looked up at the iron bars in his way.

Are they booby-trapped somehow...? Sitting on his knees, he reached with his left hand for the crossbar holding the door closed. As soon as his fingertips brushed it he felt a chill run through him, and he rapidly yanked them back.

It felt the same as that weird gun the crazy scientist in South-hairo had had. On the face of it these seemed like ordinary iron bars, not even particularly strong, but if they were all charged with this, those creatures wouldn't be able to touch them. That scientist—“Daniil,” wasn't that his name?—had said he'd been here eight years ago. Apparently their technology's development had taken a slightly different turn since then... He caught himself feeling almost impressed and cursed softly. Everybody and his brother just *had* to come up with some new idea to make trouble for him.

He glanced down one more time (without making eye contact) at the glaring *thing* lying on the floor in front of his knees. He started to wonder whether, if Daniil's little sister's "replica" had been functioning, she would have turned into this, too...and then he quickly banished the idea from his imagination. Fortunately—if he could call anything about the situation "fortunate"—that would never happen.

Time to get a move on. Harvey wanted to get this over with as soon as possible and get the hell out of here. But even assuming Jude was somewhere in this facility, if creatures like this were wandering around everywhere, Harvey had to admit it was doubtful he could stay sane long enough to find him.

He stood up, forcing himself to scrape up some fighting spirit, and turned his head from right to left as he thought about what to do next. That was when it happened.

"Yo. Nice thing you've got there," echoed a voice off the rock wall. For a split-second Harvey froze stiff. Without moving a muscle, he rolled his eyes in the direction it had come from. There were no signs of life in the corridor. The long, narrow enclosed space stretched on straight ahead as far as the eye could see by the emergency lights.

"Sheesh. Over here," it called again mockingly. In a cell just two doors up, a figure lay sprawled as close to the bars as it could get without coming into contact with them. Its limbs were splayed at unnatural angles. As Harvey watched, its face lifted a few centimeters off the ground and turned toward him. That face was sickeningly familiar, and yet so very unremarkable that at first he couldn't remember who it was—not until the man tilted his head a little, and the murky glow of the emergency lights hit his bluish-gray eyes.

"What the —?!" Harvey fell back a step, horror-stricken. All thoughts of being quiet had flown right out of his head, so his shoes crunched against some of the dust layering the linoleum floor with a scraping sound.

"Come on, now, is that any way to react? Hiya, Ephraim, it's me..."

Joachim stretched his right hand out toward him through the bars. The skin on the back of that hand looked like the skin on all the other *things*: it had putrefied and regenerated by turns so many times that excess cells welled up, fell off, and flip-flopped around on the floor like separate creatures.

"H-How did you...?"

"It's not all that mysterious, is it? They collect corpses from all over the

planet and use them as experimental subjects. And you did kill me.” Evidently satisfied with Harvey’s response, his sunken, unremarkable cheeks quirked in a twisted smile. “So, what’d you come looking for?... Oh, is that little girl’s corpse here, too?”

“You bastard!” Unthinkingly Harvey took a step toward him, hand forming a fist to punch that smile off his face, but he managed to stop himself before he went any further. Inside he was boiling with rage. He wrestled down the urge to beat the other man to death this instant, instead just spitting out, “She’s got nothing to do with this.” At that, Joachim gave a laugh that gurgled in his throat like it was getting caught on a froth of his own blood.

“Must be Jude then, eh?”

He was struck speechless.

“So I was right. Give me a prize.”

“...” Why did this man have to get on his nerves so much every single time he spoke?

“Why are you so fixated on a guy like that? Me, I hated him. Don’t you remember that time in Easterbury’s occupied zone when he ordered us not to sack the place? Talk about hypocritical. And when kids would come up to him he’d always give them gum or something, even though our supply lines were overextended, too, and everything was hard to come by! It seriously pissed me off—hey, wait. Wait!”

Harvey flatly ignored the sudden memory-lane routine (no way did he even want to hear this guy talk about the past) and started making a wide circle around Joachim’s cell so he could continue down the hallway, but the other man called him back again. He paused resignedly.

“Hey, help me out as long as you’re here. This place seriously stinks.” He pressed his face up close to the bars without quite actually touching them, and said, “We’re old friends, right?”

“Like hell we are!” Harvey sure as hell had never thought of them that way. He began walking again, not meeting Joachim’s eyes. “If I feel like it, I’ll come back to kill you later. Relax and look forward to it. I’ll release you from that pathetic body of yours for old times’ sake.”

“I said wait. I know where Jude is.”

He stopped again just past the cell and glanced toward its inhabitant without turning around. The other man abruptly wiped the smile off his face and looked serious, his dimly glowing slate-colored eyes boring into Harvey’s own through the bars.



“If it’s Jude you’re looking for, he’s here all right. I’ll tell you where, so lend me a hand already.”

“...And why exactly should I believe you?”

“You don’t have to believe me. But you came because you thought he was here, didn’t you?”

They fell silent for a while, glaring at each other. The moans coming from the other cells rang in Harvey’s ears. They sounded horribly amplified—keening groans rising and falling as if through a loudspeaker. He shook his head to dislodge the echoes from where they seemed stuck in his eardrums, and then let the motion carry him, spinning him about-face.

He made his way back to stand in front of Joachim’s cell. “Stand back,” he spat down at the prone man. “And don’t you dare touch me.” Joachim meekly obeyed, dragging himself laboriously backward. As Harvey drew up close to the bars, he saw the cell was a cesspit: the floor was buried in dried-out vomit and excrement, scraps of necrotized tissue, and other bits of refuse. He gulped down the bile rising in his throat again. *Disgusting.*

“Can you touch it?” he asked his right arm. It rose in answer and lightly brushed against the bars in front of him. When it confirmed that Harvey’s flesh body wasn’t affected, it took one of the bars in a firm grip.

The motor at his elbow gave a faint whine, and the iron bar slowly but steadily began to bend.



Harvey fumbled his lighter as he attempted to walk and smoke. “Crap...” He tried to catch it before it hit the ground, but his depth perception failed him, and his hand missed it by a hair. The corner of the cheap lighter made a cheap sound hitting the pavement.

When he crouched down to pick it up, the tip of someone else’s shoe hit it and sent it flying.

“...”

Harvey just watched it rattle noisily down the road, his arm hanging in the air half-outstretched. Then he lifted his face with the unlit cigarette still in his mouth. There were three or four young men standing above him. From the look of them, they had to be slum hoodlums. They were radiating haughty arrogance, though Harvey sure didn’t see anything for them to be

proud of.

One of them, the one who had the middle of his face secured with tape and a giant square of gauze, looked down at him with obvious malice and growled, “I thought you looked like him, but I guess you’re not my guy.” He sounded mad about it. *If someone’s going to get mad here, shouldn’t it be me?* Harvey wondered, blinking his single eye. The boy caught the motion and stared openly at his face—at the gauze covering his right eye, and then down at the empty right sleeve tucked into his pocket—and muttered a curse too fast for Harvey to make out. He got the impression it was some kind of slur people used on the streets here.

“Dammit, the next time I see him, he’s a dead man.”

“That guy’s fucked in the head.”

And with that, the punks walked right past him, grumbling to each other. Harvey didn’t have any particular urge to start a fight himself, so he just spared them a glance over his shoulder before picking up the lighter and standing up.

“*What was their problem? And they didn’t even apologize!*” the radio hissed.

“Beats me,” Harvey answered indifferently, and finally lit his dangling cigarette. Maybe he should be getting angry, but he actually cared so little that, offhand, he couldn’t even think how to work up the anger. Now that he could use only his left hand, he was dropping things a lot more often. But then again, without really thinking about it he was also using that inconvenience as a means of self-reproach, so he kept letting it continue.

He looked down at his empty sleeve and made low sound of frustration.

It was his own fault he’d lost his partner. His own fault, for being naive enough to believe that jerk for even a moment.



“Hey, I like that arm you’ve got. Something’s possessing it, right? Give it to me.”

Harvey ignored the over-familiar voice trying to strike up a conversation with him and concentrated on the task of crawling forward using one arm and his knees. *He just always wants whatever I have.*

He was creeping along after Joachim through the cramped space between the walkway and the pipes running along the ceiling. Every so

often he almost got kicked in the face by the sole of the shoe a few centimeters in front of him; each time he hit his head on the pipes trying to dodge. “Pick up the pace. I don’t want to stare at your ass a second longer than I have to,” he grumbled softly.

Joachim, who was slithering along on his belly, craned his neck around to glare. His mouth twisted in displeasure. “Shut up. I’m doing the best I —”

And then right in the middle of the sentence, the other man’s upper body suddenly plummeted downward out of sight. “Gah!” Harvey automatically threw himself forward and grabbed the back of Joachim’s shirt with his left hand. He was dragged along the floor, and for a moment it looked as though they’d fall together, but then his right hand grabbed the steel frame near his feet and supported both of their weights.

There was a great gap in the network of slats they’d been crawling on where the joints should have connected them more closely. They lay on top of each other with their upper bodies hanging suspended off the edge. Harvey started to heave a sigh of relief at being saved, but at the last moment he caught his breath back in and held it. Relief turned to alarm. He could hear footsteps coming down the hallway below them.

Two suits (two people in suits?) of plate armor that looked like security soldiers stepped out of the dimness while they stayed frozen in that awkward position. They weren’t equipped over the face, but their white plating was the same as what the Undying Hunters wore. Luckily, they didn’t seem to have noticed Harvey and Joachim. They walked right along, with no pause in their metallic footsteps.

No sooner had Harvey thought they’d made it through their pinch than the man he was gripping with his left hand suddenly writhed and clapped both hands over his mouth.

“Ugh, no! Don’t throw up now, dammit!” Harvey hissed. He was panicking a little, but he couldn’t very well move now and make noise. He waited almost prayerfully for the soldiers to leave. Soon enough, the footsteps disappeared down the other end of the hallway. The instant they were gone Joachim’s control seemed to snap, and the glob of internal organs he’d hacked up fell to the linoleum floor with a wet smack.

Harvey finally let out the breath he’d been holding in a thin stream and crawled back up onto the walkway, carelessly yanking Joachim up after him while he was at it. Joachim, weak-faced, collapsed into one more coughing fit before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Then that

same mouth quirked up in a thin, revolting smile and he whispered, "Sorry, man. Thanks for the rescue."

"I only did it because if you fell they'd have found me, too," Harvey replied bitterly in the same low voice. *Dammit! I rescued him by sheer reflex!* He was starting to pretty seriously regret not just dropping him. "Whatever; just hurry up and show me where he is."

"Yeah, yeah. Why are you so hung up on Jude, anyway? What's he ever done for us?"

"I'm grateful to him, even if you're not."

"Interesting."

"Shut up. I've got no interest in having this in common with you."

Joachim gave a disappointed snort, and they both looked moodily away from each other, abandoning the conversation to concentrate on crawling again. Eventually they came out of the bare-rock passageway and into a place with a paved ceiling. They cut through a ventilation duct into the crawl space between the ceiling and the roof, where tangles of cables and thick pipes made their path even more horribly cramped. A low, annoying noise like a boiler running vibrated deep in Harvey's gut.

That was around the point where Joachim stopped. He looked over his shoulder at Harvey and gestured in front of them with a jerk of his chin. There was a ventilation grate in the floor. Dull bluish light bled up from it.

"Open it."

"...Who the hell do you think you are?" Irritated, Harvey shuffled up to the grate and sat next to Joachim, who had scooted over to make room for him. His right hand gripped it and pried it off with a soft whine of the elbow motor. It made a huge scraping noise, but fortunately the power-plant noises around them were even louder, so it didn't seem to be a problem. His right arm put the grating down softly, trying to avoid making any more noise (for whatever that was worth now).

"Come on, give me that thing."

"Give it a rest already."

"God, what's the big deal about an arm or two?" he complained with complete disregard for any inconvenience to Harvey as he poked his head through the opening and scanned the area below. He pulled back up right away and motioned with his eyes. "Check it out." So Harvey stuck his head down through the space he'd vacated and peered down.

Screech!

A shrill ringing seemed to pierce straight through his eardrums and

deep into his brain.

Screech! Screech! Screech!

Wincing at the intermittent ear-splitting sound, he squinted into the space below, which turned out to be a room indistinctly lit by emergency lights. He could feel the chill of the crawl space's floorboards even through his clothes, yet that room was enveloped in such heat it was sweltering.

It was a cheerless room. Which only meant it was undecorated—it was by no means bare. Tightly packed pipes, cables, and the like covered walls and ceiling, encroaching even up into their crawl space on the other side. And every one of them fed into the gigantic piece of equipment taking up the far wall, like the roots of a great upside-down tree.

He compared it to the room he'd seen in Daniil's little sister's memory. There were some differences—years had passed, after all, and it had been pretty wrecked at the time—but this was definitely the same place. Back then, Jude had been in there amongst that equipment...

"No....," he panted without thinking, hardly realizing he was speaking. "No..."

In the deepest recesses of the equipment all the piping fed into, there was definitely a human form, just as there had been then. If you could still call it *human*, that is.

All that was visible now were a few scraps of ruined tissue centered around the black stone at its heart, where all the bio-cables were connected. Its limbs and head were gone without a trace. Exposed bits of nervous system dangled like bundles of string from a spinal cord that surely no longer functioned.

Barely-there human remains.

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but that's what's become of Jude. He's nothing but an energy source to power this place and the 'replica core' production equipment."

Harvey heard Joachim's voice coming from somewhere behind him. The worsening ringing in his ears interfered, though, and the words became mere sounds, passing in one ear and out the other without ever reaching his brain. The sounds of the lab's power machinery should have been louder, but the ringing dominated his hearing.

Screech! Screech! Screech!

The source of the noise was *its* heartbeat. Throbbing pain pierced his temples in time with the blinking of the amber light inside the stone.

His left hand was frozen in place holding the rim of the ventilation shaft, and he couldn't get it to move. In its place, his right hand hesitantly reached up and brushed one temple. "Oh...I'll be okay." He bit his lip and somehow managed to peel his eyes away from *that* to press his forehead into his partner's palm.

"So, there you have it," said a flippant voice behind him at the same time that he was abruptly kicked down through the shaft. His left hand automatically took his whole dangling weight to keep him from falling, but a boot immediately kicked at his fingertips.

Even as he hit the floor of the room below, his eyes bounced up to the ceiling to fix on Joachim. "You little bastard!" He was missing a few fingernails now, but he blocked out the pain before the signals could reach his brain. "You set me up!"

"You always were easy to dupe. You won't live long that way, you know." Joachim's sneering face peeked down out of the ventilation duct, and he actually waved before pulling himself back up. "Bye!"

Just when Harvey thought he'd gone, he popped his head down one more time. "Oh, hey, I'll let you have some more decoys to distract them, so get on out of here if your luck holds out that long."

This time he left for real.

Harvey grunted in irritation, more at himself than anything else, and let his gaze drop from the ceiling to do a quick scan of the walls around him. No sooner had he found the emergency lights for two exits, one in front and one to his right, than all the lighting was snuffed out. A second later his whole field of vision was bathed in dark red. The warning color—he was certain that in the dead girl's memory he'd seen several surveillance cameras in this room. By the time he remembered this, the alarm had already begun to shriek.

"Shit..." The tinnitus in his ears hadn't stopped, and the alarm combined with it made his headache even worse. He covered his ears with his hands and staggered toward the front exit, but several people appeared under its lighted sign, accompanied by the sound of violent footfalls. A platoon of armed security soldiers...their weapons didn't seem to be carbonization guns, not that this thought comforted him much.

"Don't move!"

Yeah, right! Harvey didn't get the feeling that surrendering quietly would turn out any better for him than resisting capture. He changed course for the right-hand door.

Screeeeech!

The ringing suddenly grew drastically louder. He cried out; his head hurt like it was about to split open, and the pain and dizziness made his knees crumple. They raked him with gunfire without wasting their breath on questions or warnings. The first time his body was slammed to the floor he sprang up, only to be slammed back down again.

How many hits did I take? he asked himself, assessing the situation. His head seemed more or less fine, but his vision had blacked out and it was taking its sweet time coming back. Something felt really wrong with his chest. Blood frothed up in his throat—maybe one of the bullets had hit a lung.

He'd just about decided he couldn't move when out of nowhere the alarm sounding somewhere behind the ringing in his ears rose to an even more fevered pitch, and people started shouting from a totally different direction.

"Who the hell lifted the security lockdown on Section 6?!"

"Send us reinforcements!"

"They've all gotten away!"

Nervous yells flew back and forth through the air, and the soldiers' activities grew frenzied.

Harvey didn't really get what was going on, but thanks to whatever it was, he still had a chance to escape.

So can I move after all? He tested his limbs and found he was just barely able to make them operate. He poured all the mental strength he could into shutting out the pain and the tinnitus, and attempted to stand up. But when he tried to prop himself on his right arm, it wouldn't respond. It just hung limply from his shoulder. *Why isn't it answering me?*

He had a bad feeling about this. Looking back over what had happened, he realized that if his right arm hadn't moved lightning-fast to protect his head, his brains would be splattered across the floor right about now.

Harvey took quick stock out of the corner of his eye. The metal frame was smoldering. He put it out of his mind for the moment and geared himself up again, pushing himself into a sitting position with his left hand. Then he was up and running toward the open emergency exit, but before he made it there he found himself turning to take one last look at the far wall.

And in that unguarded moment, a bullet gouged a path across his

cheek, the impact rattling his brain around in his skull, and suddenly the right half of his field of vision was gone.

Still, he turned to take one last look at the far wall—

In the corner of his remaining vision, which was rapidly being eaten away by a spreading red stain, he confirmed for himself one more time that all that remained there was a ruined corpse—just a chest cavity and a few scraps of nervous system—and the truth he hadn't quite been able to believe before finally sank in with a heavy, final click.

Oh...

So Jude is dead.



He'd wandered back kind of aimlessly, since he was mulling something over, so the sun was already setting by the time he reached camp. The performers were coming home from their day at the park, too. He could tell that things were livening up in the clearing.

Someone must be making dinner, because the smell of sizzling meat was coming from somewhere nearby. He came to a stop just past the wall of blocks at the entrance. The smell brought back bad memories, and nausea washed over him. He hadn't eaten so much as a scrap of jerky since that day. In fact, just about the only things he'd really swallowed were water, smoke, and booze. He honestly wasn't sure why his stomach hadn't degenerated.

As he stood there considering just wandering off somewhere again, something rolled up to his feet. A rubber ball, about the size of a soccer ball. It was one of the ones they juggled in their street performances. It stopped when it touched the tip of his shoe, and then two tiny hands, grubby with sand, picked it up. The little girl crouching there looked up at him and said, "Welcome home, Harry!"

"That's *Harvey*," he replied, though he'd pretty much given up by this point. This was the radio's fault for teaching her weird pronunciations.

"Everybody's busy now. Let's play!"

"Not happening," he said flatly, but he pulled the radio off and deposited it in her hands as a substitute.

"Corp'ral, let's play!"

"Sure. What should we play?"

“Ball!”

Harvey was pretty sure you couldn’t play ball with a radio, but he kept his mouth shut and leaned lightly on the block wall behind him. Habit made him reach for the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, but he’d smoked so many trying to relieve his ringing ears that he was fresh out. *I’ll go get some from Shiman later.*

He left his hand in his pocket and gazed aimlessly up at the camp lights dotting the twilight sky, though he watched Nana out of the corner of his eye as she started chasing the ball around by herself. Inside, he was questioning: *Jude...what should I do...?*

He’d figured that somebody would eventually censure or destroy or otherwise deal with that lab and those *failed experiments*—that at any rate, it wasn’t his job. Or more like, he didn’t want to make it his job. He had his hands full just taking care of the people close to him—himself, Kieli, the radio, and *maybe* Beatrix if he really stretched it. And he’d never felt the least inclination to help people he didn’t even know, either.

Yet now, no matter how many times he tried to convince himself it had nothing to do with him, he just couldn’t get their groans out of his head. It was only getting worse since that thing with Christoph.

He didn’t want to admit it, but he’d realized after meeting Christoph that in the end, he probably couldn’t leave them be after all.

The capital. I have to go there one more—

He sighed, and muttered without really meaning to, “But I can’t do that, can I...”

Obviously he wouldn’t be able to take Kieli with him this time either. He could leave her here with Shiman, or he could ask that bartender on the parish border to take care of her—there *were* trustworthy people to turn to—but then he’d be up and leaving her when he’d just decided during their reunion in Gate Town to stay with her as much as he could.

What was more, the next time he went there, he’d be going with a firm goal in mind: to destroy. So probably—probably he’d go there with no intention of coming back.

Harvey leaned back on the blocks, looked up at the sky, and repeated his question to the man who’d been his old friend and superior officer, the man who couldn’t possibly answer him. *Tell me, what do you want me to do...?* He wanted someone else to clinch this for him. *If you’ll just ask me to do it, I will. I’ll man up and go obliterate everything that’s left of you without a trace...*

Something tapped against his shoe. Looking down, he saw it was the ball again. Nana ran up to him, the radio hanging around her neck. He dropped the whole troublesome line of thought for the moment and kicked the ball back to her. Then it struck him that something was off. “Where’s Kieli?”

The ball bounced off a dip in the ground and veered away from Nana instead of toward her. She was so caught up in chasing after it that her answer was distracted: “Kieli? Oh, she’s not back yet.”

Harvey furrowed his brow. “Wait, I thought you two were going to the park together today.”

Nana picked up the ball, holding it lovingly to her chest, and then finally turned around to face him properly. “Nope,” she said, puzzled. “She went somewhere this morning. I’ve been with the bear.”



Another troupe treated them to a whole skinned, dried guinea hen for dinner that night. Apparently they’d all had a grand old time cutting, trimming, and cooking it. Since Kieli hadn’t made it back in time for the meal, she at least took over the cleanup, setting off for the washing area with a giant pile of dishes.

Water pipes ran along the outside of the back wall of the trailer equipped with the tank. Eight faucets were lined up there. Kieli took the one on the end and started filling the dishpan with water. She was deep into battle with the mountain of plates when she sensed someone nearby.

When she lifted her head, there was a tall, thin young man standing propped against the corner of the wall.

Now that she thought about it, they hadn’t actually crossed paths since she’d run out in the middle of the card game last night. Relieved to see his face after a day apart and uncomfortable about what had happened the night before, Kieli ended up frozen with both hands plunged into the dishpan.

He just stood there silently for a while, too, staring off into space, so between the two of them there was an awkward lull.

“W-Welcome back,” she ventured in a stiff voice.

“How was the park?” he asked abruptly. His voice came out with its usual lack of emotion, the sound of it so apathetic that she questioned

whether he was really interested in the answer. “I was thinking, here we came all the way to Westerbury, and I haven’t taken you there. See, I can’t go in. What’s it like inside?”

“Oh, um, it was really fun. Uh...”

He didn’t give her time to go on. “Why are you lying?”

Kieli gulped, her mouth snapping shut. Then, suddenly inspired, she drew her hands out of the water and said unconvincingly, “I forgot, I left more dirty dishes back there.” She tried to escape, but a hand pushed at her shoulder none too gently, knocking her back into the wall. The tall form closed in, looming over her, and an arm propped itself against the wall to trap her there. Right now Harvey’s left elbow brushing against her right ear didn’t feel anything but scary. She plastered her back against the wall and shrunk in on herself.

Seeing Kieli’s fearful reaction to him, Harvey seemed more lost than victorious. “...Look, I’m not angry, okay?” he said, his voice over her head softening a little. “I don’t mind if you lie to me, really. I lie too. But you’ve stuck your nose into dangerous business again, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“Then where were you today?”

Kieli bit her lip and didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she answered him in a murmur, without looking up: “Why should I have to tell you every time I go somewhere? You never tell me.”

As soon as the words came out of her mouth even she thought they were pigheaded and stupid, but really, on this issue it was Kieli who had a bone to pick with Harvey.

He’d never told her anything—not that he’d known all along Beatrix wasn’t in Westerbury, or that he’d really been searching for Christoph instead, or that he hadn’t brought Kieli along because he’d thought Christoph might be dangerous—not a single thing! He liked to call Kieli reckless and all that, but if you asked *her*, Harvey was the one who was always going off and getting into trouble on his own. He might worry about other people, but he was totally indifferent when it came to himself, and he had no idea how that made her feel. Yes, she knew now...Harvey probably thought she still didn’t know, but she did.

After that gibe, she clammed up, still looking down. A tired sigh ruffled her bangs. “You and I are different, you know that.”

“No, it’s the same thing,” she murmured, softly but with no hesitation. This time Harvey was the one with nothing to say.

Kieli looked up through her lashes at the coppery left eye in front of her, and then all at once she reached out and touched the patch covering the right eye. Harvey tried to dodge her, a bit startled, so she stared him into submission.

“Why isn’t it healed yet?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Harvey hedged. In the end apparently no ready excuse came to mind, so he blinked theatrically and looked away. They were facing off at close distance, and yet they kept just missing making any eye contact. A stiff silence passed between them.

The air was almost frozen with tension when an incongruously carefree voice called, “Hey, Kieli, I’ll help you out there!” at the same time that what looked like a ghost made of plates loomed out of the darkness around the corner of the trailer.

Bearfoot’s face peered out from a gap in the precarious mountain of dishes he’d piled so high he seemed sure to lose control of them any moment. When he saw the way Harvey and Kieli were standing, his mouth fell open in a little “ah” of surprise. By then, Harvey had pushed himself up off the wall and turned to walk away. As he passed the gaping Bearfoot, he glanced back over his shoulder at her, paying no attention to the other man, and said, “You don’t have to say anything now, but tell me right away if something happens.” That was all. Then he disappeared around the corner Bearfoot had just come from.



Bearfoot's head spun quickly to look first at Harvey, then at her. "Hey, what happened? Did you two have a fight?" he asked, walking closer. He sounded sort of hopeful. Kieli knew it was rude, but somehow she didn't feel like making any response. She returned to her sink and started in on the abandoned washing again, turning the day's conversation with Joachim over in her mind as she worked.

She'd gotten to hear about a lot of things that'd gone on in the capital that Harvey hadn't told her about. How he'd met Joachim in the lab there (Joachim said that they'd used decoys to distract the guards while they escaped together, but Kieli thought that must be at least partly a lie—otherwise why had Harvey ended up collapsed alone on the streets of Gate Town, and so badly hurt?), and...and what had become of Jude, too. Harvey hadn't explained that at all other than to say that he was dead, but now she finally understood what that had meant.

She hadn't taken everything Joachim said on faith. She didn't want to believe him about Jude, for one thing. In fact, she'd prefer to think he'd made the whole thing up.

But Harvey's reaction just now had confirmed something for her: if nothing else, the part about his core being somehow damaged was true.

...And if she were honest, she wished that one thing could have been the lie, even if it meant everything else had to be real.

"Um, Kieli...? Are you mad about something?" Bearfoot asked bewilderedly.

Blinking, Kieli realized she was scrubbing away at the dishes as if they were her mortal enemies. Then she remembered that she'd just left him standing there holding all the dishes he'd been kind enough to carry over for her. "Put them down there, please. Sorry," she said. But she said it too quickly, without looking up, which only made her seem even angrier. She felt bad for poor Bearfoot.

All I do is get angry... She hated herself for being so obstinate. She should've asked Harvey directly and honestly, but because she'd taken that weirdly mulish attitude toward him instead, things were all messed up now. *Just look what happens when I strain not to cry.*

Kieli wished tomorrow would never come. That way she wouldn't have to bear any uncomfortable encounters with him, and if time stopped now, Harvey would never die...For so many years, time must have flowed so slowly and gently for him. Could meeting Kieli have sent him suddenly tumbling downhill in just these few short years? She actually found herself

thinking, *Maybe he'd be better off if he'd just never met me.*

She didn't want to see him tomorrow. She didn't know how to face him, and she was afraid she'd lose it and get angry again, become someone she didn't want to be.

What should I do tomorrow...?

Pressing her lips together and glaring fixedly down at the dishes in her hands, she thought.

I'll go again tomorrow.

Episode 2: Neverland—I

Hearing an intruder enter the hallway that evening, Joachim opened his eyes.

In truth, he didn't have anything you could call an intruder alert system. If pursuers from the Church found him, he wouldn't need one—they'd come barging in with guns blazing. Anyway, they had better things to do than comb every abandoned building in the world looking for failed replica Undyings. And he drove off the vagrants who came looking for a place to sleep by blatantly running the water, broadcasting his presence.

Still, he figured he might as well instill a little fear by saying he *had* rigged the place to warn him of any intruders. And yet this particular intruder apparently wasn't watching out for traps at all. She just walked straight down the hall and opened his door as if she owned the place.

He furrowed his brows at the figure in the doorway. "...What are you doing back here?"

"Do you have a problem with it?" said his fifteen- or sixteen-year-old, black-haired, black-clad intruder, not even bothering to hide her animosity toward him. After a pause, she continued. "I came to keep an eye on you. To make sure you don't do anything to Harvey."

"Wow, what a knight in shining armor you are," he said disinterestedly, flumping down on the bed. "I won't do anything. For now." He wasn't the Church's lackey anymore, so there was no real reason to go mess with Ephraim right that second. Then again, he *did* hate the bastard enough to happily kill him anytime, anywhere, which was a perfectly good personal reason. So he might lay Ephraim a trap if the mood struck him, and he was fairly sure he'd stick a knife in the man's guts the second they actually met face-to-face.

On the pillow he coughed a little; it brought up a bloody clump of new

cells. He still wasn't getting any better. When he was lucky, the fits of out-of-control cell formation that periodically attacked him subsided after a few hours—but when he wasn't lucky, he spent endless days writhing in pain, creating an ocean of blood and bile on the floor.

“Does that hurt?”

Joachim answered with his face still buried in the pillow. “No. It feels gross.”

The only answer he got was an indifferent “Huh.” The girl didn't seem particularly worried about it either way. *Don't ask if you don't care what the answer is anyway.*

After standing in the doorway for a while watching him suffer, Kieli walked a little ways into the apartment and leaned against the wall by the bathroom, the same as yesterday. She didn't do anything else, though. She only kept the same expressionless eyes on him. It was bothering him more and more by the minute.

“If you're going to stay here, sit down. I'm getting irritated just looking at you.”

“I'm fine here. I'm keeping tabs on you, so I'm not going to sit down. Just leave me alone.”

Leave YOU alone? This is my room! Not that he could vouch for the comfort of the couch, either. “Oh, I just realized I haven't bought you any hot chocolate yet. Sorry. Tomorrow.” He thought he'd tease her again, but he fell into a violent fit of coughing before he'd really begun.

“Tell me something else. Finish what you started yesterday.”

When he'd more or less finished hacking up everything, he answered her on one last cough, throat scratchy. “Nothing left to tell.” It was hard enough just breathing today. He wished she'd just stop talking to him.

But she kept asking her questions, in a surprisingly hard voice considering how hesitantly the words themselves came out. “Hey, is there any way to fix a broken core...?”

“If there is, *I'd* sure like to know about it.”

“Like...what about if we switched it for one of the new cores they're making in the capital?”

“Ha! Now *that's* a fun image. Even if it worked, you'd just get an incomplete product like me—and if you were unlucky, he'd end up a monster and he'd eat you. Go ahead, suggest it to him. I'd love to see that.” Sheer willpower got all the words out in one stream, without a single cough.

Joachim was being sarcastic, obviously, but when he looked over at the girl she had this brooding expression on her face, as if on some level she was seriously considering it. *Oh, for crying out loud...* “Listen, brat, I don’t care how hard you think, there’s no way *you’re* going to be useful here. He’s probably thinking about it in his own dumb way already, so just leave him to it.” Even as he spoke, hearing the words coming out of his mouth made his flesh crawl. *Wait, why the hell am I giving her advice?!* He wanted to scratch his back at the sensation. Since he couldn’t really move too well, though, all he accomplished was wriggling and rolling like a caterpillar poked with a stick. Kieli looked confused. He averted his eyes and buried his face in the pillow again with a scowl.

When she tossed out a different question after a moment, she sounded almost tired. “Hey, how come you don’t get along with Harvey?”

He didn’t raise his head. “Because I hate him.”

“You two were both in the Westerbury army, right? Were you together the whole time?”

“I guess.”

“What about before that?”

“What do you mean, ‘before that’?”

“What Harvey was doing before the army.”

“Hell if I know. Don’t ask me about it. One day I found myself in Jude’s unit, and I found myself hating him. That’s all.”

“Was Jude with you the whole time, too?”

“Yes.”

“And before that?”

...Seriously, why are you asking me that? “Hell if I know. I heard he was a mercenary, and he came from someplace different than us.”

“What was Jude like?”

“A freak.”

“What do you mean?”

“...”

How long was she going to keep this up? Joachim was sick and tired of it. He tried ignoring her for a while, but the girl by the wall showed no signs of giving up. He could feel her piercing gaze trained on the visible half of his face, and it wasn’t budging. He got the feeling that unless he did something she’d just stare at him forever, so in the end, he caved. “...He’d pass out gum and stuff to kids. Can you believe that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“He was an Undying!” he choked out in a bitter voice. It felt a lot like puking up his guts—and he was getting woozy from nausea, too. He closed his eyes. Once his vision was blanketed with the dusky color of sundown, it wasn’t quite so bad.

That big guy had liked giving stuff to kids since way back when. As far as Joachim was concerned, it wasn’t a question of liking kids or being nice: that was just plain unbelievable behavior for an Undying. Undyings were supposed to have lost all those feelings along with their memories.

If he remembered right, it was when they stopped by some town for supplies. Well, anyplace was pretty much the same. Every single time an army truck pulled into town, the local kids would flock around it looking like a bunch of idiots. “Give us something, Mr. Soldier!” “Got any gum?” “Got any smokes?” By the time he’d gotten down out of the truck bed, Ephraim was surrounded by the little brats. And he didn’t even seem bothered by them! He didn’t run them off or yell at them; he just ignored their presence entirely. That pissed Joachim off, too.

He kicked one of them as he passed behind Ephraim, saying, “You’re in my way,” and they all ran off shrieking. Just as he was thinking *Serves you right*, they all swarmed around the front of the truck instead, cheering this time. He turned to see a gigantic NCO stooped over in front of the driver’s-side door passing out chocolates and sticks of gum.

“Why would he even have gum?” Joachim spat, watching them out of the corner of his eye. “It’s not like he chews it.”

“Beats me,” Ephraim replied absently, leaning against the side of the truck and rummaging around in his clothes doing God only knew what. Pretty soon he was sticking his hands into all the pockets of his uniform coat and mumbling to himself. “Huh? They’re gone...” This guy had no memory. None.

Jude glanced over from the driver’s seat, and then two sticks of gum were flying through the air at them in an easy arc. They each caught one and looked back at the man who’d thrown them with an expression that defied description.

“You were watching me like you wanted something.”

“Yeah, right!”

“Ephraim, you’d better give up cigarettes and chew that stuff instead,” their superior officer said innocently before turning back to the work of distributing snacks to the kids. They both shot him sulky looks and said in chorus, “I don’t want any,” then gave simultaneous grunts of annoyance at

finding themselves so in synch with each other. They got even more pissed off at the tiny smile on Jude's face and looked away, noisily opening their wrappers and popping the gum into their mouths, but they ended up doing that simultaneously, too.

They never saw eye to eye about anything, ever, and yet they had this weird habit of *doing* the same things. It annoyed the shit out of Joachim. They'd had a cat-and-dog relationship for as long as he could remember, pretty much over stupid stuff like that. Not that he remembered anymore how long "as long as he could remember" even was—he'd definitely hated Ephraim on sight when they'd met in this platoon, but he kind of got the feeling that hadn't been the beginning of it.

...Huh?

So...when was the beginning of it?



Suddenly Kieli was awake. A second later, she remembered where she was.

No way! I was sleeping?!

She'd thought she'd been standing the whole time, but somewhere along the line she'd sat down against the wall, rested her forehead on her hugged knees, and fallen asleep. She stood up, horrified at herself at how utterly careless she'd been.

The sunlight was completely gone now. On the other side of the curtainless window, the sky had sunk into a deep blue-gray darkness. The bustle of the nightlife on the main street hit the thin windowpane as garbled, muffled static. The feeble light from the streetlamps shone faintly on the profile of the man lying on the bed next to the window.

His face was awfully pale, though the low light must contribute to that, and the shadows there stood out so strikingly that for a second she was frightened that he'd died. But—

He's...sleeping?

It was kind of anticlimactic. Examining him from a distance, she saw that he was apparently asleep on the pillow stained with his own blood and bile.

Kieli had always seen a little of Harvey in Joachim from the moment she'd first laid eyes on him, even though they didn't look alike at all apart

from both being tall, skinny, and about twenty. Now she thought she could see a little bit of why she'd never been able to shake that impression. They had the same air about them, maybe, even if only here and there, and in a different way from how Jude and Harvey were alike. It was in things like how Joachim looked now, like how both of them somehow looked so childlike when their faces were unguarded like this.

Though they absolutely, definitely didn't have anything else in common.

"You're sleeping...right?" she whispered. When there was no response, she crept quietly up to the bed. A few steps away she stopped and cautiously peered into his face, moving closer only when she felt sure he wasn't going to stir. Softly, so softly, she reached out a hand and resettled his blanket more snugly around him.

"I have to go home."

Kieli spun quickly around and ran out of the room.

A few minutes after the scurrying footsteps had disappeared down the hallway, Joachim cracked his eyes open. "Of course I'm not sleeping." What was that girl, an idiot? First she'd forced stories out of him, then the next moment she was slumped on his floor, breathing in the peaceful rhythm of sleep. *It'd serve you right if I assaulted you.*

As soon as he thought this, he started really regretting. Geez, he *should've* assaulted her. Maybe he'd chase her down and assault her now.

Okay, sounds like a plan. He started to sit up, and stopped to think for several seconds with just his head off the pillow before changing his mind and lying back down again. Until just a little while ago, he'd felt so bad he thought it might be easier to just tear his own heart out, but while he'd been lying down a lot of that had begun to fade. True, he was still a far cry from his old self, but he thought if he stayed like this a little longer, he could probably get back enough strength to move normally, at least.

So he buried his face in the blanket Kieli had pulled over him, determined to lie there a little longer. *She must be an idiot*, he repeated to himself, and closed his eyes.



I can't believe I slept there! What's wrong with me?!

Kieli berated herself while she ran through the dark streets of downtown. Her breath finally gave out around the time she'd passed through the busiest streets, and she slowed to a fast walk for the rest of her hurried way back toward camp. She'd left word that she was going out, but she hadn't expected to be so late. She'd hardly been able to sleep last night or the night before, so she'd let down her guard a little...

Maybe the reason she'd let down her guard was that listening to Joachim, she'd started to feel almost as if Harvey were talking to her. It really irked her to compare Harvey to that jerk, though. And Harvey would never tell her about the past anyway.

As she walked due south, the buildings steadily thinned out and the sky opened up ahead of her. She should hit the train tracks soon. Across the tracks were the ruins of the old city—now the site of the theme park. Smack in the center of this night sky, a shade darker than the one hanging over the new city, Kieli could see the round face of the tower's clock: a hazy white circle hanging there as if suspended in nothingness. If the twin moons were out tonight, they might look like triplets.

She could take a shortcut to the camp by coming out in front of the park and going east on the path along the train tracks.

Hmm?

She'd been sensing someone behind her ever since she'd left the main street. At first she'd thought it was just her imagination, but now she quieted her footsteps without changing her pace, and concentrated on what she could hear. Yes, there it was: someone else's footsteps. Several someones, in fact.

What's going on? I don't like this...

She hoped they just happened to be going the same way. It was possible they were performers heading home. That would be no problem.

Kieli tried speeding up a little, just in case. Would the footsteps change, too —?

—Yes. They sped up to match her...!

No! She automatically broke into a run, as if someone had poked her in the back with a cattle prod. She still clung to one last ray of hope that it was just a coincidence, but this time even that hope was dashed. The footsteps behind her started running, too. When she glanced over her shoulder, she could make out three of them. There was no mistake about it now: they were after her.

What? Why are they chasing me?!

Coming out of the city proper, her field of vision abruptly widened. The fence along the north side of the tracks sprawled out before her, and directly ahead lay the stairs to the bridge.

They caught up to her just before she reached it. A hand grabbed her arm. "Let go of me!" She managed to shake free, but the momentum sent her stumbling, and one of the others took the opportunity to circle around in front of her and cut off her escape. One in front, two in back. Trapped, Kieli had no choice but to stop.

"Lucky us! We went looking for the guy, and here we found the girl," said the man blocking her path in a sort of nasal voice. For a moment she thought he must be talking about Harvey, but then she recognized him in spite of the giant square of gauze taped over the middle of his face. He was one of the thieves—the man with the knife that Joachim had beaten up. The two men behind her must be buddies of his.

"Tell me where he is."

She glared up at him through her lashes and answered in a hard voice, "I don't know. He was just passing by." She definitely didn't have any obligation to protect Joachim, but...he must still be in bed, weak and asleep.

"Tell me. I know you know."

Though she shrank from the hand that grabbed at her shoulder, she managed to hold on to enough bravado to say, "I told you, I don't."

"Hmm..." His voice suddenly turned mild. Kieli thought he'd given in surprisingly easily, but she turned out to be wrong on that count. The hand on her shoulder gave her coat a hard yank. "Well, that's fine. We'll just take our apology from you instead." There was a snicker from behind her. A chill ran down her spine, and she froze.

No, another Kieli in her head warned, *you have to keep moving. Run!*

"Wah!"

She took off running, practically hurling herself at the man and knocking him down. Her coat had slipped half off on the side where he'd tugged at it, but she didn't pause to fix it; she plunged up the stairs straight ahead of her before she even thought about which direction she should be running in. *Harvey—!*

"Hold it right there!"

The angry shouts and violent footsteps chasing her from behind spurred her on. She took the steps two at a time, and after an almost-fall when she reached the top, she sprinted across the footbridge with everything she

had.

Harvey, I'm scared, Harvey, Harvey—

She called his name over and over again in her heart, but the one word that wouldn't come was *help*.

You don't have to say anything now, but tell me right away if something happens.

Last night's words echoed in her ears. He hadn't even tried to force it out of her. He'd *trusted* her. This was what she got for insisting on being so stubborn. Asking for help now would just be too selfish...!

Halfway across the bridge, someone yanked her hair from behind, and before she could blink, more than one set of hands was holding her still, forcing her to the ground. "No!"

"Ow! She's a fighter, guys!"

"Pin that leg down!"

Kieli's cheek and knees were scraping open where they pushed her against the pavement, but she didn't care. She fought back, thrashing her arms and legs with every ounce of her strength.

"You little—ow! Settle down or —"

A little scream like a puppy yelping tore out of her throat. She hugged her stomach where he'd kicked it and curled into a ball, but they ripped away both hands in no time, and someone's weight settled onto her lower belly. Between the pain and the weight, she couldn't breathe. Somewhere a little apart from her, separated from her by some sort of film, she heard a voice say *Good, she's flagging a little*, and then a man's leg or arm or something cut off her vision and she didn't know what was going on anymore, and somewhere in the midst of all that something warm was wriggling up under her sweater. Her head was churning with how disgusting the feeling of sticky, sweaty palms on her skin was and how she wanted to puke and *Don't tug on this sweater. I bought it with Beatrix—*

A hand crawled up her thigh under her shorts and touched her underwear.

Something snapped, and all at once her thought processes were oddly clear.

There's nobody here to help you. Escape on your own!

Uttering an incomprehensible howl that wasn't even a true scream, Kieli started just kicking at the man on top of her as best she could.

Apparently she hit a tender spot with one knee; he let out a hoarse cry, and for a moment the weight lifted. Kieli seized her chance and wriggled free.

She stood up as fast as she could and ran stumblingly for the clock tower looming in the sky overhead. She cradled her throbbing belly with one hand. It hurt so bad she wanted to cry. *No, not now. They'll catch up with you soon.*

Harvey, I'm sorry, Harvey...I'm so sorry I said those things to you yesterday, I'm sorry for thinking I didn't want to see your face tomorrow, I'm just stupid, I'm so stupid...!

Kieli was the one who had no idea how she made *him* feel. She'd only been thinking about herself, about how she'd hate it if Harvey were gone. She'd never given a thought to Harvey's feelings. And it must be Harvey who was suffering the most.

No matter how hard she tried to think about something else, the pain in her belly dragged her back to the terror of the here and now. She could hear footsteps closing in on her, but she hurt too much to run very well. Casting a hopeless glance behind her, she took her eyes off the path ahead only for an instant, and the next time she put her foot down it landed on air.

There wasn't even time to shriek. By the time Kieli realized what was happening, she was already tumbling down the stairs. She curled up and covered her head right away, but she still took brutal hits all over her body, and in the end there was a loud crash and a blow to her back as if someone had hit her from behind.

Strangely, she didn't feel any pain there. She was on her feet again in no time, but she didn't think she could run anymore. So she circled desperately around to the inside of the bridge and dove into the space underneath the steps. There, she hunkered down, squeezed her eyes shut, and kept herself from shaking by wrapping her arms around her own shoulders. They were sure to find her soon. But she couldn't run away anymore—

Kieli had thought they were right on her heels, but even after waiting there a little bit, she still didn't hear anyone coming down the staircase. Holding her breath and straining her ears to catch any noise she could, she made out voices talking above her head. They sounded unsettled about something.

“...Wait. She's not moving...”

“Maybe she's dead?”

“No way.”

A short silence.

“Hey, doesn’t this look pretty bad?”

“Should we run...?”

“...Let’s run.”

After this exchange, softer voices saying things like *This is your fault* blended with scurrying footsteps, all of it retreating from the bridge toward the new city.

Even after everything around Kieli was quiet, she cowered in the stillness and darkness of her cramped hiding space for a while, her eyes shut painfully tight. Maybe it was a few minutes; maybe it was longer. When she’d waited for quite a long time, the stiff tension in all her muscles finally relaxed a bit. Slowly, she raised her head. That was when she noticed that the pain in her stomach was gone.

She twisted her upper body to peer cautiously around the side of the bridge. Squinting into the gloom, she saw nobody moving out there, so she crawled timidly out. *They didn’t find me after all...?*

She couldn’t believe it yet. Her brain and her body were both stressed to their limits, and they seemed frozen in that state, unwilling to settle back down. Looking up at the top of the stairs, she double- and then triple-checked: there really wasn’t anyone there anymore. The stiff expression on her face still didn’t soften, but she did feel some relief.

Kieli pulled her disheveled clothes back on, quietly letting out her pent-up breath...and belated tears streamed out of her along with it. “...Harvey...”

I want to go home, right now... But he really would be mad at her this time if she showed up looking like this, and she’d make him awfully worried. She could’ve gone to Beatrix, if only Beatrix were here...what would Beatrix do at a time like this?

She definitely wouldn’t be shaken and sobbing like Kieli. Kieli bit her lip and wiped her face, pulling herself together. *Anyway, I have to go somewhere else. I can’t stay here forever. Those guys might come back.*

So, then. She bent down to retie her boot laces—

—and saw *herself* lying on the ground at her feet.

“...Huh?” Blinking still-teary eyes, she looked down at the body below her neck, the body of the standing Kieli. Yes, she was here, all right. But there was also the self collapsed on the pavement in front of her.

What...what? What? Who is that?!

When she backed away from *herself* in a panic, her heel brushed against something.



It should be the first of the steps up to the bridge—but, it wasn't. It was person. A dead one. Kieli whimpered. No sooner had she pulled her foot away than she tripped over something else and fell over it, landing on her butt on the other side. When she looked to see what it had been, she saw another corpse just like the first one. Facedown. It wore a grayish-green jacket like a soldier's uniform. Its back was covered in blood. It lay slumped limply across some rubble jutting out of the ground, and dried bloodstains on the rubble traced the shapes of the fingers on its wide-flung hands.

Wait.

Rubble —?

She'd crossed the bridge, and on this side of the bridge was the park gate, and yet somehow she was now somewhere completely different. And anyway, the time seemed all wrong. Instead of the slate-gray night sky, the sandy, cloudy sky of daytime stretched out in front of her as far as the eye could see. Underneath that sky, instead of a cityscape made of clockwork attractions, she saw a real city, half in ruins. Clouds of dust blew by between the rubble-covered corpses littering the ground. The dust was a red-brown color, as if dyed with blood spray. Some of the bodies lay limp against the rubble with their backs bloody messes, some of them were missing arms or legs, and some of them had no heads attached—

No...no, no, no...!

Kieli couldn't even find the breath to scream anymore. For the moment she just backed away as fast as she could, reaching behind herself to feel her way along the rubble and keep from touching any of the bodies.

From somewhere far off in the distance came a low rumble like the sound of an earthquake. Like the sound of a cannon—and then someplace a little nearer by, there was a series of explosions that shook the air around her. Before the echoes had even died down, she heard more of them, this time even nearer. They were coming closer and closer.

Boom!

The instant she heard the blast go off almost right on top of her and saw the column of smoke rising from the ground, Kieli jerked into motion. She bolted. Stumbling over pieces of rubble, half-crying as she stepped over the limbs of the dead, she had no idea where she was or where she was going. She just ran away from the sound of the cannons. Inside she was chanting one name over and over, like a magic spell to keep her heart from breaking right there in her chest: *Harvey, Harvey, Harvey...*



Maybe she's dead?

The men's conversation from earlier came back to her mind, and the sight of that other her lying unmoving at the bottom of the stairs. Could this ruined city be the world of the dead...?

"No way..." But her voice sounded thin and uncertain, and even she didn't find the denial convincing.

By the time Kieli tired out and stopped running, the tears wouldn't come anymore. All that was left was the tightness to her skin where the desert wind had dried them from her cheeks. She looked down, focused on nothing but the rubble in front of her and the sight of her own boots, one of which was still untied, and put one foot in front of the other, treading with heavy steps over the shards of broken glass and concrete.

The tip of one boot kicked something that rolled a little ways. A bloody uniformed arm. Shifting her gaze a little, she saw the body of a soldier lying faceup and glaring at her with empty, gaping eyes. She didn't even have the energy to react now, though. Her numb brain called up numb thoughts like *I just wish his ghost were somewhere nearby* as she stepped over the arm and kept going.

I need somebody alive... Kieli looked up in mute appeal. It seemed as if she'd walked a long way, but the scenery hardly changed at all. Along a street lined with half-broken buildings flowed a river of debris dotted with human remains that extended straight ahead past the dust-hazy horizon.

When she found the one single person moving in that river, she was so past hope of really being able to see someone there that her first reaction wasn't joy; it was at doubt her own eyes.

He wasn't an adult. He was a boy not much taller than Kieli. Just as she wondered to herself what he was doing there, he kicked one of the bodies over so that it was right-side-up, then crouched down and began to go through its uniform pockets and belt pouch. *He's scavenging corpses...*

The boy happened to look up at her then, and Kieli swallowed, startled. *What?*—For just a moment, she could've sworn he looked like someone else, but there wasn't anything about him distinctive enough for her to think *who*, and the feeling slipped away before she could capture it.

He looked a bit surprised to see someone, too. It didn't seem to bother him much, though. The expression quickly vanished from his face and he

went back to what he'd been doing.

So she tried an, "Um..." He glanced sharply back up at her, looking annoyed. Transfixed by slate-gray eyes that fit bizarrely well with the scene of concrete wreckage, Kieli faltered a little, but she went on. "I... can't get home anymore, and I've got nowhere to go..."

She realized only after she opened her mouth that she didn't even know herself what kind of help she should be asking for, so in the end she only managed the kind of thing a little lost child might say. She'd had a vague idea that things might work out if only she could find someone here, but just finding them wasn't going to work anything out all by itself (which should've been obvious).

Not knowing what to say next, Kieli fell silent. The corpse-robber boy frowned quizzically at her and spoke for the first time. "What? Did your parents die?"

"Y-Yeah...a long time ago."

"What school do you go to?"

"I don't go to school right now..." Kieli gave unsatisfactory answers to his point-blank questions; meanwhile, he looked uninterestedly away from her and went back to his work. He selected watches, gum, and everything else small and promising and dumped them into his own coat pockets, then stood up and turned as if to just walk away. Kieli gaped at him, lost. Then he tossed a glance at her over his shoulder and jerked his chin lightly. Apparently he was telling her it was okay to follow him.

She was only a tiny bit relieved, but it was something. She jogged after him, and he immediately turned his back on her and started walking.

"Um, hey...where are we?"

"South Westerbury, duh."

She dumbly repeated the curt answer. "South Westerbury..." So she really was still in Westerbury after all—but looking all around the devastated landscape, she couldn't even see the clock tower. Unable to quite shake off the fear that they were in the land of the dead, she asked, "Er, are you really alive?"

"..."

After the question came out of her mouth, she thought, *Oh, no, that was a weird thing to ask*, and sure enough, the boy threw her a very suspicious look over his shoulder.

As an awkward silence fell, she decided she had nobody else to turn to and she'd be in trouble if he dumped her, so she quietly followed him

through the deserted ruins. Unlike Kieli, who was unsteady as she climbed over the piles of rubble and broken pavement, the boy strode confidently down the rough road as if he did it every day. He was about the same height as she was, and maybe two years younger. In boarding school terms, she guessed he'd be in his eighth or ninth year.

After a while, she tried a different question. "Aren't there any more people here...?" He showed no signs of turning or answering her, so she was just resigning herself to walking a bit longer in silence when he suddenly raised his arm without slowing down and pointed at something in front of them.

The hazy sand-colored sky above was the same as ever, but they'd left the site of that street warfare with its bloody horrors and come into a district with relatively intact buildings. When she looked ahead of them there was a break in the buildings like a vacant lot, and then on the other side of that a great, still building much bigger than a normal house. Drabber, too. *A school.*

It didn't have a chapel with stained glass windows like the Church boarding school, but she could tell what it was right away. Aside from the crumbling last quarter or so at the end, the walls lined with perfectly spaced windows were more or less undamaged. In the middle of the first floor she could see a rectangular entrance cut into the building.

Schoolchildren in their third or fourth year were chasing a soccer ball around the yard, but when one of them noticed Kieli and the boy, he turned around, and the others followed his lead. The moment they laid eyes on Kieli, all the kids stopped dead in their tracks. The abandoned soccer ball bounced along the ground between their suddenly motionless legs and rolled off away from their game.

Kieli stiffened uncomfortably under their piercing half-wary, half-curious gazes as she followed the boy onto the grounds.

"Who's that?"

"Is she visiting?"

"What grade is she?"

The younger kids' questions all tumbled out over each other as they passed, but the boy with the slate eyes answered them only with an unhelpful "Picked her up on the street" before he cut through the courtyard.

"Hello," Kieli greeted them nervously as she quickened her steps to keep up. Then something made her pause and take notice.

Oblivious to all the other kids clamoring excitedly around them, there was one solitary child who stayed where she was and kept on playing by herself. The contrast made her attract Kieli's attention more than the ones making the noise.

A little girl, about first year, squatting in the sand below a pair of high and low chin-up bars that stood in one corner of the playground. She was poking at the sand with a stick and humming something. Her voice was almost too soft to hear, but when Kieli strained her ears she caught a snatch of something familiar.

Tick, tock, tick, tock...

I was right! Kieli thought. *It's her!*

It was Nana's "invisible friend," the ghost girl who'd sung with the Corporal at the bottom of the park steps—did that mean this place was the land of the dead after all? Kieli was getting beyond confused now. Flustered, she called out for the boy ignoring them and striding toward the schoolhouse to wait, and that was when it happened.

"Joachim," said a voice that struck a resounding chord in her memory. When she looked over the boy's shoulder, she saw another boy appear in one of the first-floor windows. Propping his elbows on the sill and leaning lightly out, he spared a glance at Kieli before transferring his gaze to the slate-eyed boy. "Who's she?"

"Beats me. She says she's got nowhere to go."

"There you go bringing home weird stuff on a whim again..."

"You take care of her."

"Excuse me?"

The volley of short phrases passed through Kieli's ears without being processed by her brain. She stood rooted to the spot, unconsciously holding her breath, her eyes fixed on the new boy's face.

He seemed about the same age as the slate-eyed boy. An expressionless face that looked a little too worldly for his body, eyes and hair colored the same ruddy copper as the sunset—there was no escaping it. He looked like a certain someone. Wait, no, hold on—Kieli started and turned to look at her guide, but by then he'd already disappeared through the entryway and left her behind. *Hold on, didn't he just call that boy "Joachim"...*?

Which meant...could it mean...*this* boy might really be...

At that very moment, a new voice called out a name that told her yes, it

very much could mean. “Ephraim! Ephraim, come quick!”

“Elisha fell!”

She turned toward the younger kids shouting up at him and saw that girl from the sand pit sprawled facedown in the middle of the yard.

“Seriously, why does everybody tell *me* this stuff...?” the boy at the window griped under his breath. The little girl bounced back to her feet before long as if nothing had happened, but blood was oozing steadily out of giant scrapes on both her knees.

The boy sighed and swung himself right up and over the windowsill. Then he was loping toward her. The girl was standing in place, looking down at her legs with no reaction whatsoever, but when he picked her up in his arms she clung on tightly to his neck and started bawling, as if it had only just occurred to her.

“Talk about delayed reaction.” Holding his face slightly away from the wailing voice beneath his ear, he tucked her more firmly into his grip and headed for the school entrance, urging the other kids along with him. “It’s almost lunch. Who’s on duty?”

“Sarah and Nahar.”

“No, it’s Seth!”

The little kids all followed after him, poking and prodding each other.

Kieli was left standing outside all alone with nothing to do, until the boy turned around in front of the doorway. “Nurse’s office,” he said shortly.

When Kieli blinked, he frowned slightly and looked her up and down. She followed his gaze and realized that she was giving Elisha a run for her money in the scrapes and bruises department. She looked battered from head to toe.

The memory welled up in her mind—*Pin that leg down!*—and she pulled the tattered neckline of her sweater closer around her with both hands, biting her lip.

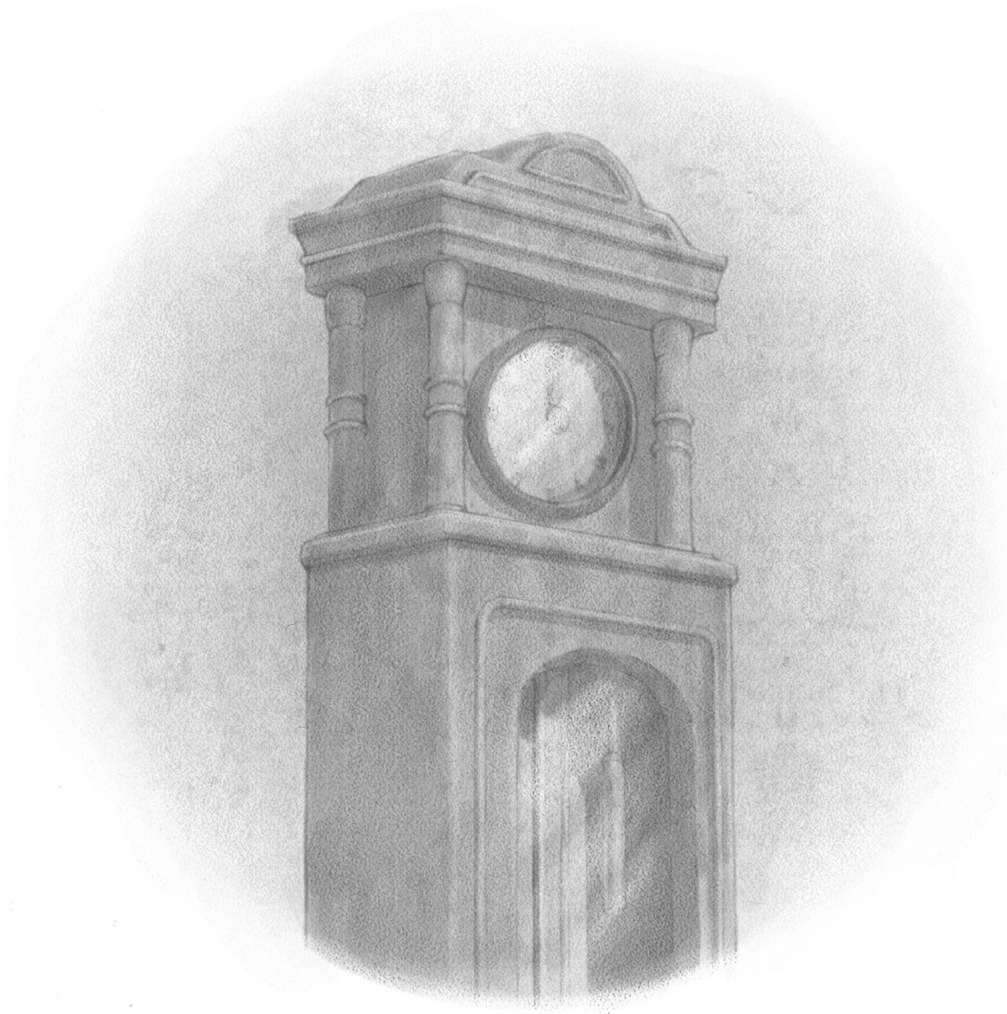
“You coming?”

She looked up at the sound of his voice to see that he’d stopped walking. He was waiting for her. He gestured toward the doorway with those ruddy copper eyes in such harmony with the thinly clouded sky. “How come you look like you’re about to cry? Come on. This way,” he growled, and then disappeared into the school.

The same eyes that seemed to feel less than everyone else; the same pleasant gravel in his voice even if his tone was a little different; his curt,

choppy way of talking—as Kieli stood dumbstruck, the face of a man who sometimes said those same things clicked unmistakably with his in her mind.

In a distant corner of their sky, the long, low *boom* of a cannon sounded.



AFTERWORD

Hello again. Or in some cases, nice to meet you. I'm Yukako Kabei, the woman whose managing editor asked not long after we started working together, "So, do you hate punctuation marks?" No, it's not that I hate them, particularly...

Lately I've been letting my dog run in circles around the neighborhood park while I sit on one of those "swaying pandas" on a spring, squeakily swaying the panda back and forth while I stare at the sky in a daze. I'm quite fond of the washed-out blue-gray skies of Tokyo. The other day a group of girls, maybe first-graders, came up to us and squealed, "What a cute doggie!" as they picked up handfuls of playground sand and threw them at it. I...wasn't sure what to do. Was that playing, or bullying? The poor thing looked put out, so I decided it was probably being bullied, so after a pause to gather my scattered wits, I picked it up and fled.

That's my life, I guess.

I've been fortunate enough to have my fifth *Kieli* book published now, but...I'm sorry. I'm not sure what came over me, but it's a two-parter. This time I used the past as a loose overall theme, and now I kind of feel as though a story that was never especially "forward-looking" in the first place has turned one hundred percent backward-looking...As usual, it's a story about a stubborn girl with a complicated personality and an immature man with a tiresome personality, getting together and being separated, and about a man who's tired of living struggling with various worries in between being hit by cars, bashing his head into signs, falling off walls, and whatnot.

It ends in a pretty appalling place, so I...would *like* to keep you waiting as little as possible for the second part. It would make me very happy if you'd join me again for the conclusion of the story.

Oh, right, and needless to say, the "tick tock" song that appears in this book is "My Grandfather's Clock," but it's not the familiar Japanese version; I grabbed the original lyrics and loosely translated them using my sketchy English skills. These days the CD with Mr. Ken Hirai's cover has the English version included as well, so many of you may know this already, but the line that says "one hundred years" in the popular Japanese translation is "ninety years" in the original, so actually the grandfather in the original song dies ten years before the Japanese grandfather. I imagine

the translator changed it to “one hundred years” because in Japanese “ninety years” doesn’t fit the melody well.

So anyway, basically what I’m trying to say here as I display my scant knowledge of folk songs is that if you try to sing the Japanese lyrics in this book to the tune of “My Grandfather’s Clock,” it won’t work! It won’t! I tacked on missing words as my fancy took me, with the result that the lines are now far longer even than the original English! I figured I should make those mumbled excuses here...

Now then, this time I’ve broken off smack in the middle of the story, so I’d like to make my acknowledgments in Part 2, if I may...Oh! But I’ll make an exception for my beloved Taue-san, who yet again propped up my clumsy novel with his exceedingly wonderful illustrations, and write just a little bit to him. Taue-san, the drawing of the bear on the back cover was such a hit with me that I could hardly cope. I’m sorry for selfishly saying Kieli’s shorts would be cuter if they were a little shorter. I’m sorry I started ranting broken things like “Bare shins!” and “Gorgeous legs!” and “Clavicles!” and...I—I think

I’ll stop now before people question my personality...(it’s way too late, isn’t it?).

Anyway! *coughs* Last but not least, to all of my longtime supporters and to all of you feeling interest for the first time—I give my very finest thanks to you who are holding this book in your hands. I hope we get a chance to meet again in *The Sunlit Garden Where It Began (Part 2)*.

Yukako Kabei

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